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County Chairs Speak Out: How Mississippi's County Party Organizations Connect with Voters

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**County Chairs Speak Out: How Mississippi's County Party Organizations
Connect with Voters after the 2011 Redistricting Cycle**

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By Phillip C. Waller

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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ABSTRACT

This paper includes the results of a qualitative study of 11 Mississippi county party chairs interviewed about their role in the state and how that role has been affected by redistricting. I highlight their comments on their perceived roles, organizational purpose, voter outreach strategies, competition, voter turnout and state and county relationships.

Though I started my project hoping to focus on the effects of redistricting on county party organizations' outreach to voters, only 3 of the 11 county chairs I interviewed significantly changed their actions after the 2011 redistricting cycle. The only county chairs who mentioned major changes in their operations were ones that saw their entire county switch from a Republican controlled U.S. House District to the state's only majority minority Democratic U.S. House District. For the Democrat I interviewed, the changes had a positive impact on his efficacy and connection to his representative. For the two Republican chairs I interviewed, the effect was a loss of power, efficacy and connection to their representative.

Successful county party organizations recognized their strengths and targeted races that were winnable with a focus on word of mouth communication, quality candidates, clean competition and extensive voter education, both formal and informal. Chairs engaged their communities through their organizations, making use of the existing social networks to connect in a "pyramid" hierarchy of county party chairs, executive committee members, precinct representatives, church and community leaders and voters. All county party chairs I interviewed could benefit from more state party support in the form of increased resources, carefully crafted strategy and continued training for new or struggling county party members.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Redistricting is one of the messiest processes in politics. Every ten years, every state is forced to change the boundaries of its voting districts to accommodate the population changes. While much of the literature on redistricting focuses on the legislative process and the physical process of creating the lines from the Census data to maintain “one person, one vote” representation and keep incumbents in power, not as much research focuses on the impact that redistricting has on the people who find themselves in new districts after a redistricting cycle. As Winburn and Wagner recognized in their 2010 report, “Carving Voters Out” not enough attention is given to “the effects that redistricting has on the voters themselves, especially in terms of voter information, turnout, and behavior.” The actions of voters in these districts and their attitudes towards participation as a result of redistricting has more of an effect on electoral outcomes and party efficacy than the availability of literature would suggest.

In fact, redistricting is credited with a bevy of voter problems, ranging from voter misinformation, broken information pathways, low turnout, voter roll-off and lack of engagement. County party organizations - the front lines of the national party system - are one of the few consistently unifying organizations among voters. When voters change districts, these local units are the ones that have to reevaluate how to organize, distribute resources and deal with changing levels of influence and efficacy, especially when there are significant population changes that force large areas of a county to change districts.

The party organization’s response to redistricting is a very complex process and as such, it is not understood very well, especially considering the high levels of variance from district to district and state to state. A general review of the literature suggests that no two states approach the problem of redistricting the same way and that each state has a high level of variance from

county to county. This is especially true in the state of Mississippi where there are large swaths of rural territory dotted with small urban and suburban communities.

Considering the relative lack of information available about redistricting and its effects on voters at the county level, more research is needed to fill the gaps of knowledge about this process. This study is a small step towards that goal, as it seeks to comprehend the actions of the Mississippi county political party organizations in the wake of 2011 redistricting cycle and the 2014 midterm election. I chose to view the process through the lens of the county party organization as these organizations are the front lines of the state party organization and have the most direct contact with voters in a district. These county organizations are also one of the few political organizations that are available as a resource to voters in every county from year to year and election to election. While campaigns and advocacy groups may come and go, county party organizations remain.

Mississippi is uniquely positioned as a case study due to its rocky history of redistricting. Mississippi has been required to submit its redistricting plans to the Justice Department for preclearance since 1965 to fulfill the requirements of the Voting Rights Act. A 2013 decision by the Supreme Court reversing parts of the VRA means that this past cycle was the last cycle that Mississippi will be subject to preclearance. This relaxation of the Voting Rights Act requirements clears the way for more state control over the redistricting cycle and potentially reduces the threat of lawsuits alleging racial bias that have slowed down past redistricting cycles. Mississippi did not escape litigation this past cycle, but the civil lawsuit that was filed against the approved plan did not stem from issues of race. As state Rep. Ed Blackmon told the Clarion Ledger on March 7, 2011, this election, legislators were proud to say that race was not a factor in

the decisions to draw the lines. “We have come a long way. I am proud to say we’re fighting about everything other than race,” Blackmon said.

At the same time as the VRA restrictions are being relaxed, the state is completing a Republican takeover of statewide party offices that is only broken by the majority-minority U.S. House District 2 (MS-2), where long-time Rep. Bennie Thompson presides. In the most recent midterm election (2014), the biggest competition was not between Republicans and Democrats, but rather between Tea Party conservatives and more traditional state party Republican.

This redistricting and subsequent Republican transition begs the question about how party organizations are adapting to the change. What behavior are they keeping the same? What new methods might they be employing? How effective are these methods in reaching their voters? What plans do they have for the future?

I seek to answer all of these questions through a qualitative study of the county party organization in the state of Mississippi. I begin my analysis with a review of the current literature on redistricting and how the issues of race, competition, voter information and voter turnout affect general voter engagement. I also examine the existing literature on the structure of county party organizations. I add to the existing literature a qualitative study of county party organizations composed of 11 semi-structured interviews with Mississippi Republican and Democratic Party chairs. The majority of my interviews were from counties that experienced U.S. House District boundary changes after the 2011 redistricting cycle. Two interviews were from Lafayette County, a county that is on the fringe of the new MS-2 boundary that did not change U.S. House Districts, but may see changes in the future as MS-2 loses population and adds territory. After summarizing the content of these interviews, I looked specifically for the interviewees’ comments on their perceived roles, organizational purpose, voter outreach

strategies, competition, voter turnout and state and county relationships. I condensed these comments to a series of themes and topics that I then describe in context with excerpts from the interviews. I then discuss the implications of these themes and suggest ways that county party organizations can improve their outreach to voters based on what other county chairs found to be successful and the national literature suggests.

One significant takeaway from my conversations with county party chairs was their response to the effects of redistricting on their operations. Though I started this research process hoping to focus on these effects on county party organizations' outreach to voters, by and large, county chairs did not significantly change their actions in response to the most recent redistricting cycle. Accordingly, county chairs did not discuss the effects of redistricting on their counties at any length. The only county chairs who mentioned major changes in their operations were ones that saw their entire county switch from a Republican controlled U.S. House District (MS-1, MS-3 or MS-4) to the state's only majority minority Democratic U.S. House District (MS-2). Only two counties I surveyed fit this description. For the Democrat I interviewed, the changes had a positive impact on his efficacy and connection to his representative. For the two Republican chairs I interviewed, the effect was a loss of power, efficacy and connection to their representative. One county chair went so far as to say she felt "abandoned" by the switch from Republican to Democratic representation at the U.S. House District level. The Republican response is significant, considering the structure of Mississippi's congressional districts and MS-2's racial composition virtually guarantee Democratic control of MS-2 for the foreseeable future, no matter how many resources Republicans pour into the district.

Another significant conclusion of my research was the focus of county party chairs on word of mouth communication and their reliance upon community groups such as churches and

party affiliated organizations to spread their message. In Mississippi, the county party organizations I spoke to are still focused on getting out the vote one person at a time, despite the rise of social media and other modern campaign implements. As one chair put it, “All politics in Mississippi is local. Even if you are running for senate, you’ve got to run it like you’re running for mayor.”

After speaking with these county party chairs, it became clear which county chairs were strong leaders and effectively managing their territory and which ones were failing to produce significant results. The successful county party organizations recognized their strengths and targeted races that were winnable with a focus on quality candidates, clean competition and extensive voter education, both formal and informal. Successful party chairs engaged their communities through their organizations, making use of the existing social networks in their communities to connect in a “pyramid” hierarchy of county party chairs, executive committee members, precinct representatives, church and community leaders and voters. All county party chairs I interviewed could benefit from more state party support in the form of increased resources, carefully crafted strategy and continued training for new or struggling county party members.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

A Brief History of Redistricting in Mississippi

While every state has its own challenges when it comes to the question of drawing voting districts, Mississippi is uniquely positioned in that it is confronted with its past history of voting rights offenses while simultaneously trying to move forward. The Voting Rights Act of 1965, meant to keep the state's elections open to minorities and guarantee descriptive, "one person, one vote" representation in the state and federal legislatures, has potentially marginalized white Democrats and moderates in favor of preserving majority minority districts that are Democratic strongholds. The creation of these majority minority districts concentrates black Democrats' power, leaving the majority of other voting districts (both state and federal) vulnerable to the conservative Republican movement that has been growing in Mississippi since the passage of the Act. As a whole, Mississippi has become more polarized in recent years, mirroring the nationwide shift to the poles. To fully comprehend the present voting situation in Mississippi and how voters engage with politicians, a brief understanding of the events of the past 50 years is necessary.

Voting Rights Act and Mississippi

Perhaps the most controversial and persisting element of Mississippi's redistricting patterns over the past 50 years has been the high level of federal involvement in the state redistricting process. The oversight hopes to guarantee the rights of minorities to vote in the South after nearly a century of systematic oppression after the Civil War. Proponents of the Act argue that the intervention is necessary to enforce the provisions of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments to the Constitution (Holder 1). The Voting Rights Act of 1965 codified this intervention, requiring that southern states be held to higher standards in their elections to

guarantee access to the electoral process by African Americans and other racial minorities. Two sections of the legislation, Section 2 and Section 5, are the focus of much of the controversy surrounding the continued enforcement of the Act. Section 5 is particularly burdensome to the southern states, in that it requires legislatures to submit their redistricting plans to the Justice Department for preclearance. States (including Mississippi) have contended that the continued intervention of the federal government is an invasion of sovereignty and that due to considerable progress since the passage of the acts, the only appropriate action is to repeal or reduce the preclearance requirements. The Justice Department has responded to these claims, noting that though progress has been great, this progress is in large part due to the Act and that vestiges of discrimination still remain (Holder 2). The requirements of the VRA are imposed on these states specifically because of their history and resistance to federal intervention to provide minority access to the polls (Holder 2).

These claims are not without merit, as many historians have examined the impact of the VRA in the South and in Mississippi specifically. Richard Timpone notes in his research on African American office holding in Mississippi that the VRA had an immediate impact on registration in Mississippi. Mississippi saw the highest minority voter registration gains of any state (180), seeing its registered voting age African American population rising from 7.2 percent in 1964 to 75.5 percent by 1970 (178). Following this rise in registered African American voters, more black statesmen gained office in Mississippi in the years immediately following the enactment of the VRA (179). After the Supreme Court expanded the reach of Section 5 of the VRA in *Allen v. State Board of Elections* (1969) to require preclearance for voting district lines and prevent minority vote dilution, that rate of increase became more significant, leading

Timpone to conclude that the actions of 1969-1970 were the most influential events on black office holding in Mississippi (183).

While black office holding has certainly increased in the state, other academics have examined the direct impact the VRA has had on other elements of the electoral process. Richard Forgette and John Winkle of the University of Mississippi and Andrew Garner of The University of Wyoming have examined the role of the VRA in the shifting competitive landscape of the South. They examine in a 2010 article the South's transition from a primarily Democratic stronghold before 1964, to an increasingly Republican fortress in the years since Reagan's ride to victory on the back of the Southern Republican revolution.

Their review of the literature suggests that since the passage of the VRA in 1965, a combination of state and federal policies have led to an increasingly less competitive local and state legislative office landscape even while statewide and federal race competition has stepped up (292). State legislators and mapmakers are careful to safeguard minority rights and avoid Justice Department intervention. They may neither "pack" voting minority members into single districts to limit their aggregate influence on the state legislature, nor may they "crack" concentrated minority populations into other majority districts and keep these members from ever having a chance at descriptive representation. By descriptive representation, the authors mean representation that reflects not only the expressed preferences of these members but also politically relevant characteristics such as gender, socioeconomic status and/or ethnicity. All southern states, excluding Arkansas and Tennessee, have to hold to these standards either in whole or in part (294). As a result, the prevailing encouragement of the VRA to create majority-minority districts has ensured descriptive representation (293), but in the process the Act has also made it easier for mapmakers to take the smaller state legislative districts and manipulate lines

for political ends (299). The authors note that the provisions of the VRA directly influence these decisions, as southern states have fewer formal redistricting rules and rely upon federal guidelines to structure their plans and to avoid running afoul of the Justice Department (295). The resulting districts may create safe havens for both Democrats and Republicans, but the districts nonetheless suffer from severe partisan imbalances (299).

Their conclusion is that the recent partisan changes have been in large part due to the conversion of existing offices (e.g. Democrat to Republican, and white Democrat to black Democrat). The conversions lack significant competition, as new districts are drawn to ensure a certain population is descriptively represented (305). The drop in white Democrats, in particular, has been linked to the decrease of moderates in politics generally. The move highlights Congress's shift to the poles with ever more conservative and liberal Congress members (305).

Recent Redistricting Challenges

Besides causing the obvious, more theoretical challenges of shifting notions of representation, The Voting Rights Act is also causing very real administrative challenges in Mississippi. As recently as 2011, when the last Census was completed and the Mississippi legislature began the redistricting process, Mississippi was locked in a multi-level legislative and judicial battle to redraw the district lines. Complicating the process was Mississippi's unique off-year election cycle. The governor, other statewide officers and many local officials are elected in odd numbered years. If Census data is delivered too late to the state, or even if legislators spend too much time deliberating over district boundaries, the new district maps may not have time to clear all the necessary regulatory hurdles of the Voting Rights Act before candidates have to declare for state races. If the state decides to use the old district lines for the races, then a court may require the state to hold a new election using the new district lines when they become

available. This is in keeping with the “one person, one vote” idea of voting districts. If the data is available to create more equal districts, then the courts have held that the state should use those new districts. Besides being an inconvenience, these court-mandated election “do-overs” can be prohibitively expensive and difficult to administer. These time constraints are unique to states like Mississippi that have off year elections (Ballotpedia, 2).

Adding to the complexity of the 2011 cycle, no district could hope to remain untouched due to large population shifts statewide. Some areas of the state grew as much as 11 to 25 percent in population. Republican strongholds like Madison, Rankin and Desoto counties saw the majority of these increases. The Delta and Gulf Coast saw strong population losses. (Ballotpedia 4-5). To address these population changes and for the state to meet election deadlines, it would have to have had complete maps approved by The Department of Justice before June 1, 2011. However, it was not until April 2011 that the legislature even began to consider maps (Ballotpedia 5).

This late start brought up fears of another election “do-over” similar to the one that the state was forced to do at great expense in the 1991 cycle when a civil rights attorney challenged the newly approved districts (Ballotpedia 5). Also new to the 2011 cycle was the fact that it was the first time since the passage of the VRA that a Democratic administration controlled the Justice Department and so oversaw Mississippi’s process. Some activists were calling for the Department to make a test case out of the state (Ballotpedia 6).

With this added pressure, Mississippi legislators engaged in a series of battles to determine the new voting boundaries. After reviewing an initial proposal for the new districts in April 2011, several Republican state lawmakers petitioned the courts to take over the process so that elections could proceed on time and without Justice Department interference. The courts

refused to intervene until early December 2011, when a deadline for new maps passed (6-7). The 2011 elections had to proceed under the old lines after the courts affirmed the decision. By late December, they had a plan that was supported by the Mississippi Secretary of State as a viable plan that reduced split counties from 8 to 4 while halving bisected precincts from 449 to 200 and increasing the number of majority minority Mississippi congressional districts by 5 (two key metrics for voter engagement and representation noted by Wagner and Winburn) (8). Neither house of the legislature approved this plan, until early March 2012 when each house- the Democratic controlled Senate and Republican controlled House- put together their own plans. Requests for conference were denied, even while outside observers eyed the fast approaching approval deadline of June 1 for the upcoming August 2012 primary elections. Delbert Hoseman, the Secretary of State, cautioned that back-to-back elections could be prohibitively expensive. The governor discussed his personal lack of concern for the process as his reading of the Mississippi Constitution allowed legislators to wait to draw the new district lines (18). The state was consequently sued by the NAACP and the court eventually ordered the state to either immediately produce Department of Justice acceptable plans or run the elections under the old plans with a plan to complete the new district lines during the 2012 legislative session (21). State officials lauded this ultimatum as a step forward for states' rights, while others criticized the indefinite footing left for the 2012 session (21).

Despite the similarities of the 2011 redistricting cycle to the disastrous 1991 cycle, locals recognized a key difference. While the 1991 cycle controversy was firmly rooted in issues of race, the 2011 race was a simpler conflict of Republican vs. Democrat and state vs. federal leadership. As Ballotpedia notes, people are more rational about politics than they are about race

and were therefore better able to resolve the conflicts around the 2011 cycle than they were after the 1991 cycle (22).

The Role of Information in Voter Participation

Once the district lines have been drawn, and the court battles have been won, Mississippi legislators have to get their constituents to the polls. The primary factor in getting people out to vote (identified by many political scientists) is voter information. A person who does not know who or what they are voting for will not vote. The voting calculus simply does not work. Benny Geys explains in his summary of voter participation theories that voters who do not have access to the information necessary to make a decision about the candidates are more likely not to engage effectively in the democratic system. Political scientists and statisticians disagree as to what factor of information most affects voter turnout, though some do support the idea that media market access and district boundaries are a strong indicator of voter information access.

Jonathan Winburn and Michael Wagner postulate that a voter's natural community of interest is the defining characteristic of the person's voting habits and information channels. Winburn and Wagner reference the *Carstens v. Lamm* (1982) decision for their definition of natural communities of interest. They are "distinctive units which share common concerns with respect to one or more identifiable features such as geography, demography, ethnicity, culture, socio-economic status, or trade (Winburn 375)." Districts that split natural communities of interest risk exacerbating political inequality and putting voters at distinct informational disadvantages to their non-separated peers (Winburn 374). They argue that the redistricting process, which usually prioritizes (1) compactness and contiguity, (2) preservation of county and municipal boundaries and (3) preservation of natural communities, should give greater emphasis to the second and third principles (Winburn 374). This push for the natural community of interest

standard is against other priorities like compactness and contiguity that rely upon mathematical relationships more than voters' actual connections and communities.

Winburn and Wagner demonstrate that there is a connection between voters' natural communities of interest and their information channels by looking at precinct level voting data, media market boundaries and supplemental ANES data (378). They find that split districts and media markets were more likely to harm voter's ability to recall information about their representatives (378-379). While their data did not conclusively demonstrate that voters in the split districts voted at a higher or lower rate, they concluded that access to information was still very important to voter engagement and not usually considered in typical redistricting conversations. More important to their discussion was the impact that voter information access had on less sophisticated voters. Sophisticated voters had a higher level of political information than other voters. Less sophisticated voters were less likely to overcome information boundaries and were therefore more adversely affected than their sophisticated counterparts (382).

This adverse impact on disadvantaged residents is particularly important in a state like Mississippi that is the poorest in the nation and has vast swaths of primarily agricultural areas that fall far below national socioeconomic levels. Mississippi's second congressional district (MS-2) is home to the economically depressed Delta and is Mississippi's only majority minority federal district, with a predominantly African American population. Danny Hayes and Seth McKee note in their research that voters in redrawn districts with an increased African American population are more likely to roll-off their vote. Voters who "roll-off" their vote cast a vote for a top level or national candidate without indicating a choice for a local candidate. This "roll-off" shows that these voters have too little knowledge of their local races to make an informed choice. The example of voter roll-off that McKee and Hayes describe is an indicator that this new

population knows less than the population before (123). However, districts with a black incumbent that gain more African Americans see the information trend reverse (123). More interestingly, the roll-off rates did not increase for other demographics, including Hispanics. Hayes and McKee note this finding in their discussion, saying “the linking of voters and elected officials of the same race has salutary benefits for political participation (127).”

Another aspect of the information flow that McKee examines comes from his work with M. V. Hood of the University of Georgia. The two researchers examined the extent that incumbent recognition influences voter behavior after redistricting. More specifically, they wanted to know if voters were more or less likely to be able to identify their incumbent representative post-redistricting and whether that recognition translated into support for the incumbent. Their study is self-admittedly limited as it only includes one voting district in Georgia. The county was notably one of the more competitive counties in the South and was chosen to study the white vote. The study’s authors note that African American voters vary little in their voting patterns, voting 90 percent in favor of Democrat (348).

Despite the limited range of the study, the authors’ implications are strong that voters who were kept in the incumbent’s district were much more likely (89 percent vs. 58 percent) than redrawn voters to recognize the incumbent (351). They theorize that this gap can be attributed to the information costs associated with a change in district that other authors, including Winburn and Wagner, have noted (348). Further, those who did not recognize the incumbent were much more likely to vote for the challenger (351). The key to the incumbency advantage is whether an individual can recognize the representative. Here the benefit to the incumbent of strong information channels is clear- voters tend to vote for candidates that they recognize (355).

Why Voters Turnout to Vote

Though information access is certainly one of the overriding reasons for voters to engage on election day, other authors have focused on other reasons for voter turnout. Benny Geys outlines the prevailing theories of voter turnout in terms of the decision calculus that voters employ when deciding to vote. The primary take-away is that for a voter to turn out, the benefit of voting has to be greater than the costs of voting. Other political scientists have attacked this stance, but the practical wisdom holds with a few caveats that Geys addresses in his explanation.

Geys first outlines pure rational theory, which is also called the “expected utility” model of voter turnout. The equation holds that a voter subtracts the costs of voting from the expected probability that his vote will actually influence policy in a beneficial way. In this equation, the costs of voting can easily be too high and the voter decides rationally not to participate. Here, the fringe voters with the most extreme stance derive the most psychological benefit from voting, though they are the least likely to actually influence policy (17).

An addition to the rational choice theory is the consumption benefits model that assumes that some voters may derive a benefit from voting and expression above and beyond the tangible benefits of positive policy decisions. Geys notes that other authors have broken this benefit into two categories, the benefit of personal expression of choice, or the benefit of conforming to civic duty. In the first case, Geys notes that people turn out to express their choices for or against a particular candidate. In the second, he notes that people may simply turn out to express their support of their civic duty to vote (19).

The next two theories, ethical voter theory and the mini-max regret theory, employ the same addition of external benefits model. In the ethical voter theory, voters derive a consumption benefit from their perceived affect on other people’s utilities. The individual acts altruistically in voting to improve society as a whole (20). The mini-max regret theory attributes the external

benefit of voting to the minimization of a voter's own regret if they were not to vote. Here, voters are gaining the ability to rightfully complain should a candidate they did not choose negatively affect them with his or her decisions. The consumption benefit is linked to the voters' ability to reconcile their own actions and responsibility for their situation under the new leadership (21).

Extensions of these traditional consumption benefits models are the sets of group-based models that theorize that voters may not derive benefits individually great enough for them to turn out, but that the group they belong to may expect benefits greater than the group cost of voting, therefore making it rational for an individual to vote. Here, "producers" and "consumers" of social pressure will work to get the group to vote. The incentive to vote is greater if the population is not isolated. One of the distinct advantages of this theory over others is that it is more realistic than models that treat all voters as "isolated" individuals (23-24).

The County Party Organization

Traditional views of the party

While the county party has traditionally been viewed as an executor for the national and state party's actions at the local level, there is room to explore the role of the county party as an independent, dynamic institution. As local parties have a fair degree of control over their activities, each party organization leader has the ability to tailor his or her approach at the local level. Daniel Galvin of Northwestern University indicated this distinction in a paper delivered at the 2008 Midwest Political Science Association meeting. As he quoted from John Aldrich's work on the political party organization, "fundamental changes in the institutional bases of political parties" still take place during "critical eras," when new situations create a need for "dramatic changes in party structures and operations (10)." While Galvin criticizes this view of

the political party as discarding the role of party itself in these fundamental changes, the view presented by the quote still holds for the discussion of county party organizations. Today, as the nation swings from pole to pole and fewer people are being reached by traditional mass-market advertising, local county organizations have the potential to become the center of one of these “fundamental changes.”

Role of the Local Party vs. the National Party

The county party, as a local unit, is the closest unit of the party to voters. The county party organizations in Mississippi, for instance, are the organizations that select poll workers, provide training to volunteers and generally ensure the smooth operation of all state elections. This fundamental legal responsibility is the most direct connection that the party has with the actual operation of an election. While party members may not be directly involved with the operation of the election itself, they are responsible for selecting the people that will administer it.

Besides their legal obligation to administer the elections, county party chairs are the local point of contact for the state party organizations. Traditionally, this has meant county party organizations are the ones the state and national party organization rely upon to provide volunteers and connect them with individual voters or potential candidates. While state parties are becoming more like national party organizations by providing resources to local organizations through active fundraising efforts and their burgeoning sense of professionalism (Paddock 54), county party organizations still provide the base of support for the larger party organization’s efforts. Resources flow down from the national party through the state party to the local party. In return, local parties support the state efforts and the state supports national efforts with their own resources, whether that is with matching financial contributions or non-monetary

contributions. As Paddock noted, these “conduits” move resources up and down the chain with party leaders benefiting from the exchange of resources at each level of the organization (60).

Mobilizing Voters

While a traditional role of the county party organization has been GOTV efforts, that effort is coming back into hyper focus as national campaign organizations are realizing that expensive traditional broadcast and print advertising is waning in influence. National operatives like President Barack Obama’s 2012 campaign manager Jim Messina recognize that shift. As he told *the New Yorker* in 2012, “We believe that, in this age of saturation television, eventually people are going to throw their TV as far as they can out of their window, and look to their neighbors and family to have a discussion about how they’re going to vote,” Messina said. (Lizza 2012). The Obama campaign volunteers, mobilized by the national campaign but administered at the local level, were the center of the Obama campaign. The campaign capitalized on micro-level organizing, something that I argue an organized county party organization can do better than any national level organization.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Overall Approach and Rationale

More research is being devoted to the questions of how and why voters vote, but as some scholars have noted, the effects of redistricting on voter turnout have been largely ignored. In a state like Mississippi, congressional redistricting requires a huge investment of time and effort by legislators hoping to find a solution that represents the population and does not marginalize important subsets of the population. Complicating their efforts in past years has been the constant threat of judicial review of districts, dating from the end of segregation. In the effort to redraw lines, individual citizens can get caught in the crossfire, as their homes are cut into a new district, leaving them with a new representative. Besides not being as familiar with this new representative and his past legislative history, voters who find themselves in new districts may find that the new representative does not believe what they believe or represent them ethnically or share their cultural experiences. Furthermore, in a state with required majority minority voting districts, voters may find that descriptive representation is structurally impossible, no matter how much time or effort they put into their local party organization. A switch can affect information channels that have been built over decades. I hoped to answer how county party chairs work to repair these information channels.

I approach this question through a qualitative approach that seeks to describe and explain voter engagement trends in Mississippi through a series of targeted interviews of county party chairs and state party officials in areas of Mississippi that have experienced significant redistricting changes since the 2010 cycle.

I begin by exploring how the county party organizations view their role in the county and then delve into that answer, asking about voter engagement strategies and the role of competition

in relation to engaging voters and turning out the vote. I then ask the participants to speak specifically to their efforts to engage voters who have been redistricted and note their responses. As the front guard of the party, county party organizations are the primary point of interaction for many voters on a continual basis. While campaigns tend to engage voters more directly on election day, the county party organizations are the only unifying presence from year to year. These organizations and the perceived role of these organizations can tell a lot about the priorities and realities of the party system at the local level.

Personal Biography

I am a public policy leadership and journalism undergraduate at the University of Mississippi. I am particularly interested in information flows in electoral politics. As a lifelong resident of Madison, Mississippi, in the now strongly held Republican congressional District 3, I have seen the border between my district and the state's majority-minority and largely Democratic District 2 shift considerably, drawing in new populations and excluding others. With the Mississippi Delta continuously losing population, and northern counties' populations skyrocketing, I foresee many more Mississippians finding themselves in new districts within the next 20 years. As a student of public policy, I have a particular interest in how these shifts affect the voting-calculus of the citizens in my state. As an aspiring political actor, I also want to learn how this regular redistricting affects information flows at the margins of my state's counties.

Interview Selection

(Continued after Figure 1 and 2)

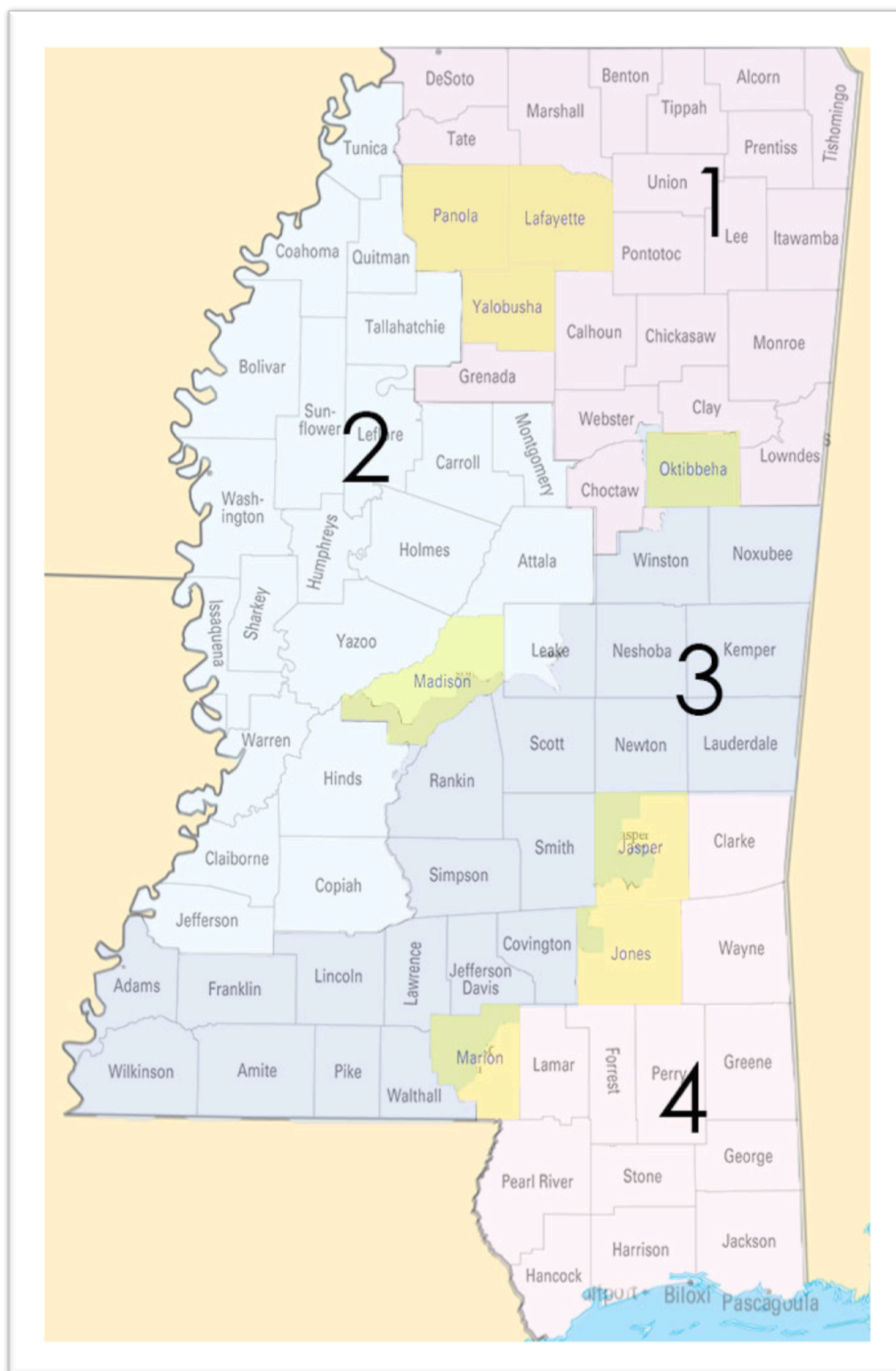


Figure 1: 2010 District Map with County Interviews Highlighted

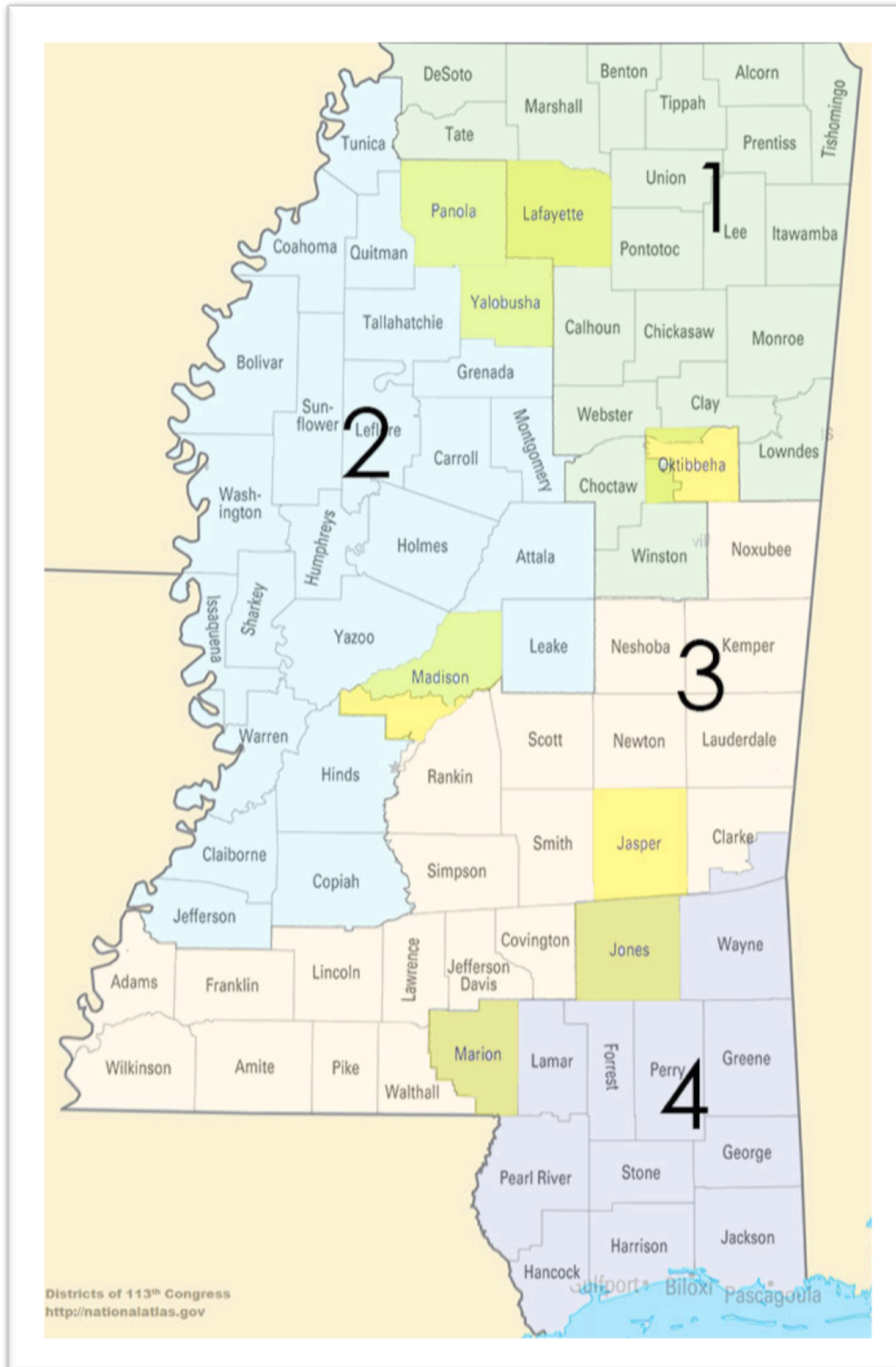


Figure 2: 2012 District Map with County Interviews Highlighted

As the bulk of my inquiry targets voter behavior at the margins of congressional districts that have experienced redistricting, I identified interview candidates from counties that had switched, in whole or in part, to a new U.S. House Congressional District. Mississippi has four federal congressional districts which makes finding the areas of overlap between new and old district lines easy, though it does limit my selection pool. This is a problem for quantitative studies, but could actually be a benefit to the scale of my qualitative research project.

My preliminary research indicated that I should target political actors in Panola, Yalobusha, Grenada, Madison, Leake, Winston, Oktibbeha, Marion, Jones and Jasper counties. I identified these areas by overlaying the district map from the 2001 redistricting cycle with that of the 2011 redistricting cycle and identifying major areas of overlap between the two maps. I focused on the overlap in counties that switched in whole or part to U.S. House District 2 (MS-2), the state's majority-minority district and only Democratic held U.S. House of Representatives seat. Theoretically, counties that switched from the strongly held Republican districts to the state's only Democratic district would experience the most change to their county organizations. The Republican chairs would find that they no longer had any real effect on U.S. House races in their district and Democratic chairs would find that their candidates were competitive at the U.S. House level. Other counties that switched between MS-1, MS-3, or MS-4 would have a less significant change, because all three districts are strongly held Republican districts with incumbent representatives who have largely similar platforms.

After identifying my target counties, I contacted the state party organizations to acquire contact information for the Democratic and Republican county chairs in each of these target counties. After establishing initial contacts, I gauged participant interest and narrowed my list to the willing participants from each county. I took special caution to balance the interviews

between Republican and Democratic Party chairs in counties with similar characteristics, if the corresponding party chair was not available for an interview. I also contacted each party's state executives to conduct an interview. One party's executives were unavailable, so I discarded the interview with the opposing party from my results.

In total, I interviewed the Democratic county chairs from Yalobusha, Oktibbeha, Jones, Jasper and Lafayette counties. I interviewed the Republican county chairs from Marion, Jones, Yalobusha, Madison, Panola and Lafayette counties. At the state level, I interviewed the executive director for one party, though I did not include his interview in the text of this paper.

Data Gathering Methods

As this study is qualitative and generally holistic, I did not want to limit myself to a single method of information gathering. I recognized that as information became available over the course of my inquiry, I would have to alter my approach to include this context or even revisit my previous work. I made sure to follow standard academic best practices in all my work.

I followed a semi-structured interview format for all interviews. All interviews were conducted via-telephone with two exceptions- the Lafayette County GOP and Democratic interviews that were conducted in person in the Oxford, Mississippi area.

The semi-structured format of the interviews allowed me to be flexible in the application of my questions and fully explore every concept mentioned in the interview. Considering the broad range of experiences from county chair to county chair, this interview format provided an appropriate level of formality, while still providing room for flexibility.

I worked extensively to form an interview structure with questions that were neutral in language and tone. I made attempts, where possible, to tailor each interview to the personal

history of the interviewee as established upon initial contact. I scheduled interviews for hour-long blocks of time to avoid unnecessarily shortening the interview. Each participant was fully briefed on the parameters of the interview before beginning. Every interview was recorded for further review. A typical interview was 40 minutes in length, with one interview lasting an hour and 15 minutes and another interview lasting roughly 30 minutes.

During the interview, I took brief thematic notes and immediately upon concluding the interview, I expanded those notes to include greater explanation and context for each interviewee. I used these summaries to refine my interview questions from person to person so that I could to explore topics of interest that were not originally in my interview structure.

Data Analysis Procedures

After collecting my interviews, I used my notes to make partial transcriptions of each interview, discarding sections of the interview that were not relevant or were off the record as indicated by the participants. Using those transcriptions, I highlighted similar sections and grouped the interview sections by topic or theme into two data sections. One section includes the interview data for counties that had both Democratic and Republican input. The other section includes interview data from counties where only one county chair responded.

While I plan to focus intensively on the thematic level of content analysis, I will also pay special care to characters, words and concepts that are repeated in the transcriptions. In my analysis, I compare and contrast the differing views of the county chairs, making reference to the party affiliation and county of the chairs.

CHAPTER IV: TWO PARTY RESPONSE COUNTY INTERVIEWS

YALOBUSHA COUNTY

County Profile

Yalobusha is a relatively rural county in the northern part of the state situated on the border of the Mississippi Delta. Immediately prior to the 2011 redistricting cycle, Yalobusha County was wholly situated within Mississippi's U.S. House District 1 (MS-1), which was and currently is a Republican seat and contains the northern corner of the state east of the Delta. After the 2011 redistricting cycle, Yalobusha was wholly incorporated into MS-2, the longtime district of Democrat Bennie Thompson and the state's only majority-minority (black) U.S. House District.

U.S. Census Bureau Demographic Information

Data Point	County	State
Population	12,373	2,992,206
Persons Per Square Mile	27.1	63.2
Voting age population	9,502	2,253,131
Persons 65 years and older	2,227	415,917
Median Household Income	\$32,930	\$39,031
High School Graduates in Adult Pop.	77.5%	81.5%
Bachelors Degree or Higher in Adult Pop.	13.2%	20.1%
African American Pop.	38.0%	37.4%
Number of Registered Voters 2.	9,110	

1. Data is for 2013 unless otherwise indicated. US Census Bureau (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/28/28161.html>)

2. 2012 Total Active NVRA Data 2012 <http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/> *Note: MS voter registration rolls are known for inaccuracies. Population over 18 is better indication of available voting age population.

With 12,373 inhabitants, the county was a low population county with low population density reaching just 27.1 persons per square mile. Of that number, there are roughly 8,700

voters who were of age to vote, though the county reports 9110 eligible active voters as of 2012 (NVRA 2012). The county's population was older than the state average (18% vs. 13.9%) though the overall racial composition was very close the state average, with 60.4% white and 38.0% black residents with the remaining percentage of the population split between Hispanic/Latino and all other races.

The county also recorded a lower educational achievement level than the rest of the state, itself lagging behind the national average of 86% of people over 25 holding a high school diploma and 28.8% a bachelors degree or higher. Mississippi's averages were 81.5% and 20.1%. Yalobusha County's is 77.5% and 13.2%

The lower educational achievement gap corresponds to a higher overall poverty level and lower per-capita income than either state or national levels. Median household income in the county is \$32,930, which is \$6,101 short of the state average of \$39,031 and over \$20,000 less than the national median.

DEMOCRATIC COUNTY CHAIR: Butler McLeod***County Chair Background******Role of the County Chair***

Butler McLeod is the Democratic County party chair for Yalobusha County. I started the interview with the same question that I started every interview. I asked him what he saw as the primary role of the county chair in the county party organization. Beyond the legal responsibilities of the chair to conduct the elections, McLeod indicated that his role was to “basically get as many Democrat elected as possible.”

McLeod relies upon his county organization to provide support for his outreach. The group of twelve members meets regularly to plan. Their focus is “keeping track of the various municipalities” in their district. They administer the county elections and also instruct local officials on the requirements for their elections. McLeod emphasized that the county party is responsible for “signing off” on every member of the local election executive committees, allowing him to exert a fair amount of control in the administration of local races- even races that are not at the county level. He noted that there is a “different personality in the city.” The city executive committee wants control over their election process “but they really can’t. They’re not supposed to even.”

McLeod spoke about the problems with organizing elections on multiple levels and getting county and city officials to effectively communicate. He noted how the previous county chair resigned, but the city kept using the previous county chair’s name on announcements and other documents until he corrected them, despite keeping open communication channels with the city. It was not indicated in the interview whether this communication impediment was a result of the perceived friction between county and city election executive committees.

Methods to Reach Voters

McLeod mentioned churches as instrumental in spreading voter information among Democratic voters in his county. His first example was a food program that feeds that elderly at his home church where they also try to “make sure that the people of the county are informed of the services of the county.” He said that the churches provide a sense of community to voters and are instrumental to word of mouth transmission of information. “I don’t know how many churches there are in Yalobusha County, but they are a good resource to get the word out,” McLeod said.

He encouraged people in churches to get their fellow members involved. “Tell someone that you know that isn’t registered to register. Tell them to get out and vote because it’s your choice. It’s your right to vote, and if you sit back and not vote, then your candidate may not win and you might have been the vote that caused him to win. You got to get out to vote, or you can’t have any complaints.” He also mentioned churches as a great resource for getting the pulse of the community. “They give us a headline on what is going on and what is important,” McLeod said. “We head out into the community to find things that need to be addressed.” Later he mentioned, “They are a good contact to get people to get out and vote. They encourage their members to join up... Churches get the interaction between the people and the church. They are real receptive if you come in and ask them (to vote and get involved) instead of telling them... I talk to them about getting the word out about the party and what we need to do and how we need to do it.”

McLeod also pointed to the huge percentage of his active voters that were involved with their local churches in some way. “Most of our members belong to a church and are active in a church. So, really, you can’t separate the two because 98 percent of them are in a church.”

McLeod made clear that he does not condone candidates speaking in churches, though he does

encourage people to encourage others to vote. “I wouldn’t ask a candidate to come to my church and speak. You just couldn’t. I don’t see anything wrong with a member or members encouraging people to get out and vote.” He further cautions candidates not to overpromise church members. “If you have a candidate come into your church and they promise things a lot of things that they know they can’t do...It’s a lie.”

Even with the community support for the party, McLeod mentioned that it is up to the county party to get people interested in the races to drive turnout. He pointed to quality candidates as a key driver of voter engagement.

Role of Competition

Another driver of interest was the role of competition in Yalobusha County. McLeod points to positive relationships with the opposing party chair and its members a driver of positive competition, though the most recent election cycle did see some animosity when black voters tried to vote in the primary runoff between incumbent Thad Cochran and challenger Chris McDaniel. “We have a small county and the county chairmen know that, so to me, they’re sympathetic to the fact that we’re receptive to working with them. There is not really animosity between the parties,” McLeod said. “(The McDaniel situation) was real, real negative, and I don’t think that the most of people in Mississippi were receptive to that type of thing... That put me on the defensive.”

The McDaniel controversy energized his voters go to the polls for a candidate they might not have considered before. It is the first time that McLeod has seen the widespread crossing over in an election. He is not sure if it indicates a broader pattern. “They crossed over for Cochran, and that made a difference in winning,” McLeod said. “If you want a Democrat, then

you vote Democrat, (if you're) Republican, (then you vote) Republican. It's your own conviction. I can't tell you don't do it. I don't ask you to."

McLeod ended his discussion of competition with a caveat about the recent trend towards nasty campaigns. "I like competition because it brings out the best in the person. He's going to tell the truth or he's going to tell a lie- if you have good competition. But what you did with your life, that's between you and God. Don't come to me telling me what this person did or his children do. That's between him and God. I want clean competition."

Effect of Redistricting on Information Pathways

Yalobusha's recent district change has not affected McLeod's operations. He mentions that he may feel more connected to his representative and that the connection to his representative is important for Yalobusha County's overall well-being. McLeod indicated that Bennie Thompson even encourages the members of the district to come to him directly with problems. "He is really receptive to that kind of thing," McLeod said.

McLeod felt more empowered by the improved connection to his representative. "It makes me feel really good because I can go to his office and connect with him since he represents us in Yalobusha County. In the past, I didn't know how to get in touch. He is more inclined to be receptive to the people in his district. So I think it's very beneficial to Yalobusha county."

Other Topics

History

McLeod indicated that the historical actions of the county highly influence how it is positioned today. The county is a long time Democratic stronghold on the local level where most

officials are Democrat. “For years, it’s been a Democratic strong county. People just vote Democratic. They vote the elected officials because they run on a Democratic ticket.”

REPUBLICAN COUNTY CHAIR: James Person***County Chair Background******Role of the County Chair***

James Person is the Republican county chair for Yalobusha County. He responded to my question about his role as a county chair first with a technical explanation of his legal responsibility. When I probed further about his responsibility to the voters of the county, he mentioned that he focuses more on the local races. Person generally sees the role of the county chair as a support system for the Republicans in his county.

Methods to Reach Voters

Person pointed to county meetings as his most important and most successful tool to engage people with the party. “We probably have the highest ratio and percentage of success with people who take part in the meetings. ... I notice more success with the one on one meetings than with a column in the newspaper or a posting on social media.”

When probed about other methods or things that he thought the county party could do to improve its communications to voters, he responded: “As with anything, I know that I could something better... Something that I would like to do... is meet every month with people around the county in various meeting places. There are people who habitually have breakfast in the gas station or the grocery store five miles out of town. Some people have lunch at a delicatessen in another area. I think if I took part in more of those, that I could do better.”

Person mentioned voter education as a key component of his personal outreach. He connects voters to candidates at their countywide meetings. Person also said that he hosts or attends meetings that are not directly associated with the county party organization where attendees share their political or governing philosophies in a public forum. While the meetings

themselves are not openly political, people are able to express their political leanings in a free-flowing discussion that helps spread the party's message without explicit attention to the party line.

Person mentions county newspapers as another public forum that he and other thought leaders in the county can use to spread their message. "While national newspapers might not be doing so well, county newspapers, on the other hand, people still read them, so someone putting their political philosophy in with a letter to the editor actually gets published (and read.)"

Role of Competition

Person spoke in length about the role of competition in his district. The elections in his county are not highly competitive at the general election stage, he said. "That's exactly why I want people to get involved early in the process. Back when I was on school board, the candidate who won the primary would go down to the polls to vote to make sure he got at least one vote, but after the primary there wasn't much competition. It was a foregone conclusion then as to who would be elected... I guess the inertia of that has just kept it that way."

He said that he thinks competition is generally good for the public and could be good for Yalobusha County, especially if it can change the voting patterns of the county. "I think people definitely (want more competition). I think we should vote for people based on their performance... We might get better government with more competition if our elected officials were more accountable."

As it stands, the county does not see much interest in elections. The midterms of 2014 were of particularly low interest. "I did not see anyone get excited about this week's house election. I didn't even hear anything from my counterpart in the Democrat party." While there was some activity around the last election cycle, he emphasized the activity in the county was

minimal. The incumbent, Bennie Thompson, was a “shoe in” for the position. Officials tend to stay elected as long as they wish. “As far as we were concerned, that job was his for as long as he wanted it. It was just impolite to turn an official out of office, because he was doing the job that he was supposed to. To give his job to someone else wasn’t heard of,” Person said.

He has noticed some change in how people treat their officials, but he reiterated that the change has been minimal. He pointed to the election of Democrat Travis Childers to Mississippi’s 1st District in 2008 and his subsequent expulsion at the next election. “Travis Childers ran in District 1 and got elected, but that was against a very weak Republican candidate. Later, when (the late Alan) Nunnelee ran, we did turn him out of office. It was something that I could not have seen happening back 60 years ago. You just didn’t do that.”

Effect of Redistricting on Information Pathways

Person operates as a Republican county chair in a county that has a majority of its officials acting as Democrats and is represented by a Democrat in the U.S. Congress.

The redistricting process of 2011 did not affect his actions as a county chair. What has changed is his connection to his congressman. He has never met Bennie Thompson, the Democratic congressman for his district, though he has met the MS-1 representative on multiple occasions. He said that this disconnect influences his feeling of efficacy. “The people that work with me just assume that we have no influence over what our Democratic congressman does. I am not even on his mailing list... I keep more up to date with what our first district congressman is doing and trying to do than what my own congressman is doing... I don’t know if (Bennie Thompson) really concerns himself with my issues.”

This disconnect has also engendered a sense of detachment. The Republican Party, he indicates, has not fielded a serious candidate to go against Thompson in the past year. Person

stressed that he still feels effective though. He relies upon the statewide offices to support his ideals. He pours much of his effort into supporting these statewide offices. “We don’t feel ineffective, we have a very viable senate candidate (Cochran) and it is important that we go and try to get people to the polls to support our man in office.”

Person has been stressing to his county party organization that they need to be more proactive in their actions to recruit quality candidates and educate voters. “What we would like to do is for the electorate to see (the officeholders) the way that we see them. But that is going to take more voter education. We’ve got to show people that the man in Washington, who wants to give you a handout, he is not your friend, because in order to get that handout, you need to remain poverty stricken. The person who does that really wants to keep you poor and your grandchildren poor. We need to do a better job of electing people who are going to do the best they can at everything, and so we’re going to have to get people to see that way again. We’ve got to have people who have a reasonable chance to win run.”

Part of that strategy involves convincing existing Democrats to switch parties and run on the Republican ticket. “Most elected officials run as Democrat, even though their political leanings are Republican. I would say that 4 out of 5 our county supervisors vote Republican... Some counties in Mississippi have seen a county-wide change of elected officials, but I’d like to see that happen in Yalobusha County.”

JONES COUNTY

County Profile

Jones County is a county in the southern part of the state situated just north of Hattiesburg, Miss. It is home to the city of Laurel, which is one of the state's more well-known cities. Immediately prior to the 2011 redistricting cycle, Jones County was split between Mississippi's U.S. House District 3 and 4, which are both current Republican seats. The majority of the district was located in District 4, which contains the Mississippi Gulf Coast and its southernmost counties. After the 2011 redistricting cycle, Jones was wholly incorporated into U.S. House District 4, eliminating the split between U.S. House Districts at the county level.

U.S. Census Bureau Demographic Information

Data Point	County	State
Population	68,961	2,992,206
Persons Per Square Mile	97.5	63.2
Voting age population	51,238	2,253,131
Persons 65 years and older	10,482	415,917
Median Household Income	\$38,074	\$39,031
High School Graduates in Adult Pop.	78.7%	81.5%
Bachelors Degree or Higher in Adult Pop.	16.8%	20.1%
African American Pop.	29.2%	37.4%
Number of Registered Voters 2.	N/A	

1. Data is for 2013 unless otherwise indicated. US Census Bureau
(<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/28/28161.html>)

2. 2012 Total Active NVRA Data 2012 <http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/> *Note: MS voter registration rolls are known for inaccuracies. Population over 18 is better indication of available voting age population.

With 68,961 residents, the county has a higher population than most counties in the state, ranking 10th in overall population. The county has a relatively high population density of 97.5 persons per square mile. Jones County has no information available in the NVRA 2012 data for number of registered voters. There are roughly 51,000 voting age citizens in Jones County, leaving a significant number of people for the county party to reach. The county's population is

older than the state average (15.2% vs. 13.9%) and the county's population is split 68.8% white to 29.2% black residents with the remaining percentage of the population split between Hispanics and all other ethnicities.

The county also records a lower educational achievement level than the rest of the state. These levels are behind the national average of 86% of people over 25 holding a high school diploma and 28.8% a bachelors degree or higher. Mississippi's averages are 81.5% and 20.1%. Jones County records 78.7% and 16.8% respectively.

The lower educational achievement gap corresponds to a slightly higher overall poverty level and a slightly lower per-capita income than either state or national levels. Median household income in the county is \$38,074, which is just short of the state average of \$39,031 and nearly \$15,000 less than the federal median.

DEMOCRATIC COUNTY CHAIR: Larry Coleman***County Chair Background******Role of the County Chair***

Larry Coleman is the Democratic chair of Jones County. Coleman indicated that one of his primary roles as a county chair was to establish a strong Democratic executive board in the county. Elected officials that are in charge of the precincts in which they reside form the executive board. The precinct captains give out information and try to engage members of the community with the party at the county level.

“For example, I live out in P5. My general role is not only to organize P5, but also as the county chair to make sure that what I’m doing out here in P5 is done in the other Democratic areas throughout the county...You find that in the areas that you have fewer Democrats than Republicans, then that is a difficult situation. But you try to inform those members who are in the minority that they still have a responsibility... regardless of race... That is basically what the role of the county chair is, to make sure that we have our people lined up for the upcoming election.”

Methods to Reach Voters

Coleman emphasized that he tries to welcome any individual into the party. His primary resources for engaging with citizens are church groups and civic groups. “It’s part of our philosophy of a big tent. We go out from time to time,... to speak to different groups, mainly church groups and civic groups. We try to give them information and make them aware of what we are doing.”

Coleman prefers to speak to voters one on one because he has trouble getting participation or feedback through any other method. He mentions young people as a source of problems for the party in that they are traditionally hard to engage, especially at the county level.

“(My outreach) is always done on me knowing the person. I can deal with these persons one on one....There is so much uncertainty in the direction that the party is going from the very top down to the bottom. And as a result, the most difficult thing that we are going to have is reaching young blacks, male, female or whatever and hold on to the few that we have that really stand tall and are out there fighting the

fight. They are so involved in other things- young kids, young blacks, they don't want to do anything. You ask them, 'Won't you come out to our meeting tonight?' and they won't show up. That's a battle I fight. It's almost like you have to go to their house and drag them out to make them show up screaming and hollering,"

Any other methods of reaching voters Coleman leaves up to the state county chair, Rickey Cole. Coleman credits the state party with the strategy to reach voters. Regardless of the strategy, Coleman lamented that he does not have enough engaged members to implement the strategy in the county. Coleman indicated this problem was statewide. "The problem that we have is that we don't have people! ... Before you make these changes you've got to have people willing to participate in democratic government. (It was) like that in our last state meeting, All we did was fight in our last state meeting. You've got people up there who don't like Rickey and who want to run things who don't know what the hell they're doing...It's not the best time so to speak for the Democratic party. We've got a lot that needs to be worked out on the state level. That right there filters down to the county chairs and workers and those who will work... on the county level."

Coleman indicated that Rickey Cole and his team at the state level were working to implement new strategies to rebuild the Democratic party in the state. He mentioned a plan to visit all 82 counties and provide training for county chairs and other party officials. "This is a grand scheme of things they have going on up in Jackson. I don't know how this will all work, but that's what they have," Coleman said.

Role of Competition

Coleman did not say much about competitive races driving voters to races, but he did comment on competition turning into outright hostility in Mississippi's most recent midterm. He said that looking back, Mississippi did not have open hostility between parties like it does today,

much less members of the same party. (The Tea Party challenger, Chris McDaniel is from Jones County). He does see a role for blacks to play in the new rivalry, indicating that he believed they were responsible for putting Cochran in office. However, he does recognize that neither faction of the Republican party was willing to put a Democrat in power.

Coleman attributes the transition in the county from Democrat to Republican to a gaming of the system that undermined the people who had put the candidates in power. “I would love to think that it was fair play, but fairness had nothing to do with it. You’ll see in some cases there were Democrat that I helped and the state party helped. They got in office and began not only to undermine me, and the Democratic party in office, but also they began to expand their own influence. Once they got in there and brought others in, it was almost like they were undermining them (too).”

Coleman also credits some of the change to a response to the election of President Obama. “I think you see that in every Southern state that has risen up in opposition to the President... The election of Obama had a hell of a lot to do with it. They became anti-government, anti-everything. That is how the Tea Party came into existence. Its ideology but also they are against the President. It filters down through to the local government, to the state and local government.”

Effect of Redistricting on Information Pathways

Coleman did not make any significant comments on the effect of redistricting in his county.

Other topics

Coleman focused intensely on the historical nature of the Democratic Party, race relations and their role in Mississippi. Coleman lived in Jones County since well before the 1960s and

remembers registering to vote in the county courthouse for the first time when federal registrars forcibly registered African Americans for the first time during the Civil Rights era.

“I taught school for 34 years... When I taught, you did not have many Republicans in Jones County. You had Democrats of both black and white. But all that changed with the civil rights movement. King and Jackson and the rest of them that came in the early 60s changed that. You had a battle between those two ideologies, and blacks were not given the chance to participate. Blacks were not able to go to a courthouse (to register)...Blacks lost their lives, but the civil rights movement was about these courthouses. It led to the federal registrars, ... (who) registered these blacks, including myself by the way... With all this coming to the forefront, there was a battle between these people who were registered already and those who weren't and whites who didn't want blacks to register, or vote for that matter. You have to remember that people lost their lives throughout the state of Mississippi, simply because of the right of the ballot.”

More recently, Coleman has noticed what he said is another race based event after the election of President Obama. “We have seen a gradual evolution of things since the election of Obama. We lost a lot of whites because of a lot of things. A lot of the things that we experience with white flight to the Republican Party, this came as a result of a black president. There's no way around it.” Coleman has noticed a trickle-down effect to his local efforts. He has a hard time convincing white members to join the party, partially because he thinks that race is an issue. He said that he tries to make the party as “open tent” as possible but that he sees more success with blacks joining the party than whites. He also sees whites leaving the party at higher rates than blacks.

REPUBLICAN CHAIR: Lew Yoder***County Chair Background******Role of the County Chair***

Lew Yoder is the Republican chair for Jones County. He recognizes multiple roles for the county party chair and highlights several in his response.

“Obviously one (of my roles) is leadership. I was elected at the county convention to represent my county, Jones County, in the Jones County executive committee. We have one statutory duty, and that is to maintain and operate our primary and make sure that it is run efficiently and properly. But other than that electoral duty, I see my job as being the face of the Republican party in Jones County, being involved and active in my community, and providing advice and information to the general public as well as to the other committee members. Obviously, another role of mine is running our monthly meeting in an efficient and effective manner and helping and recruit and find candidates, in my county and area, for office and supporting those candidates who have won nominations in the general elections. I see it as a role of leadership in helping guide the Jones County party and helping guide the direction of my board, but I also see it as somewhat being leader of the county Republican party.”

Yoder indicated that the county party organization operates independently from the state party organization. He notes that his organization is “disengaged” from the state party.

Methods to Reach Voters

Yoder emphasized his longtime connection to the county as a resource for his outreach. “People know me,” Yoder said. They come to him for information as he has been in the county since childhood. His committee is instrumental in delivering information to the county party members. Their diverse involvements in different community organizations like churches and civic groups help the party have a wide reach in the county. “I’ve got people in my committee from all over the county. They all go to other churches or civic groups, or clubs, or go to different parts of the county, so I can get that information out through my members or through the members of the executive committee. That is how a lot of information gets out.”

Yoder said that his strongest resources are word of mouth and traditional media, though he does utilize social media and other distribution hubs. He said that the key to reaching people and getting them engaged was about timing. In 2014, he noted that they were just coming off a contested midterm and were gearing up for statewide races that would interest many party members.

“Politics is all about timing. It’s what’s going on. In a dead year, where there is not an election and nothing is happening, then the responses are going to be low. The public interest is going to be low. We just peaked. We came off an election. We’ve got the qualifying deadline for statewide offices in March, there’s a little bit of a lull here during the holidays, but once we get past Christmas interest will pick back ...You’ll have a lot of interest in 2015, where there are not a lot of real elections to be had in other years. I think we’ll have a good response, just like we’ve had a good response for other years.”

Yoder mentioned that he has had success with hosting outreach events and fundraisers to drive support for the party. The Republican Women have 100 women who host events. When he took over as chair, the party had a successful fundraiser with statewide elected officials and county residents. The party also communicates with residents at the county fair. Their goal is to “get out as a party in supporting candidates and letting people know that the Jones County Republican party is here and that (community members) can be a part of (the party).”

Yoder put extra emphasis on the role of the county in distributing information. He did not see the county party as a source for information about candidates, but more of a support system for the party throughout the year. The county party could not escape its role to facilitate elections, “effectively and properly.”

“You use whatever means that are available to you to let people know who you are, where you are and what you stand for. It’s not the county party’s job to run a campaign.... It’s not my job as chairman to tell campaigns what to do or not to do, I don’t do that... A lot of the reach out to get people to vote, that is the candidates job. Our job is to help pass out the Republican message all the time, year round, to people who need it in on years, off years and every year in between. ... I think we do a fairly good job of that around here. Jones has become a strong Republican county,

and I think a lot of that comes down to the work that has been done on the ground. The grassroots work that has been done in civics clubs, in churches, with the friend groups, telling people that politics and values matter, ideas matter and our ideas are better than the other guys. ... At one point, everyone here in Jones County was Democrat. That's not true anymore."

Role of Competition

Yoder believes, in general, that competition is positive for Jones County. He notes that with around 70,000 people and close to 40,000 registered voters that it is important to get people interested in turning out. He predicts turnout will be higher in 2015 for the local races because people are interested in local races that directly affect them. "All politics in Mississippi is local. Even if you are running for senate, you've got to run it like you're running for mayor. When you're running for county office, it's about knocking on doors, shaking hands, and turning out your vote. It's politics at its finest."

The key component of healthy competition is a set of quality candidates. Yoder is open to good competition of ideas because he believes that the Republican ideas win out with the voters, even though some of his colleagues prefer no competition. "I welcome competition, Democrat running against Republican, I welcome the debate. I think we have better ideas than they do. So I think they should win, but I also have friends, who are elected officials who would love to run unopposed...But, (competition) is not necessary and it's not required. I think that our ideas are better than theirs, so we win in the long run... The SEC is the best conference in college football, because of competition, there's no doubt about it."

Yoder emphasized again the role of the county party organization in recruiting candidates. "(Elections are) about finding good qualified candidates to run for office and then having them articulate that message to voters. Whether they're running opposed or unopposed, it should be about finding principled men and women to run for office... I think quality candidates are what bring people to the polls... If you have just one honest candidate, one who has character

and values, and are speaking their mind and stand up for what they believe in, and really inspires the voters, then that is what drives voters and drives turnout. More people want to go vote for somebody than to vote against somebody.”

Conversely, Yoder recognized that bad competition can have the opposite effect. “Bad competition can turn people off. If you have two candidates who start talking about their personal lives, or what their kids did, or what their wife did 20 years ago, that turns people off from local races. We all expect the presidential race to get nasty at some point, but all Americans are disassociated from a presidential race, but you’re not disassociated from a supervisor race.” Yoder said. “If you have two candidates going in and slinging mud, then that turns away voters.... They’re not talking about the issues, they’re talking about themselves.”

He pointed to the most recent primary battle between incumbent Sen. Thad Cochran and challenger Chris McDaniel as an example of this bad competition. “I didn’t like the fact that two Republican were mudslinging in a primary. As a Republican it was hurtful to see people go after each other like that. I also saw that the turnout was high, because people were either voting for Sen. Cochran or Chris McDaniel, because their supporters believed that their values were right... That drove turnout (counter intuitively.) There is an exception to every rule.”

Effect of Redistricting on Information Pathways

Yoder is relatively new to the county chair position, only holding the office for a year and a half. He was not in the position prior to the most recent redistricting cycle in 2011. He was not able to speak to the specifics of the county’s operations before and after redistricting, so I limited my questions to his actions after the cycle.

He speculated that working in the county now is not much different than it was before. The county was technically “split” but the section was small with very few voters, he said.

“When I think of a split county, I think of a line going through the middle of it. But that was not the case in Jones County. There was a pocket. I don’t think it had a real effect.” He does not associate anything positive with the redistricting process except for slightly reducing voter confusion in the affected precincts. He did not attribute any changes to the county party operations.

Despite associating few problems with the redistricting cycle in Jones County, Yoder still offered his opinion on the importance of representative government to voters.

“I think it’s important that every voter believe that his vote matters. And that my vote doesn’t count any more or less than their vote. I do see the problem with split counties and split jurisdictions... that can cause some voter confusion. It makes logical sense. In a perfect world, we wouldn’t have split counties or split voting precincts, or split jurisdictions that would cause that voter confusion, but unfortunately, the way the law is written, representatives represent people based on population.... I know the legislature does a good a job as they can do to get with the Department of Justice and whoever else who has to certify these voting congressional districts and areas, but I don’t think that there is any doubt that it causes voter confusion. But if it did, it comes down to the party, (the state party) and the campaigns, they have to let people know who they are and what they are, and do a little bit of voter education, which can be difficult, but it’s definitely important.”

LAFAYETTE COUNTY

County Profile

Lafayette is a relatively populous county in the northern half of the state and home to the state's largest university. Immediately prior to the 2011 redistricting cycle, Lafayette County was wholly situated within Mississippi's U.S. House District 1, which is a current Republican seat and contains the northern corner of the state east of the Delta. After the 2011 redistricting cycle, Yalobusha remained in MS-1, though it risks losing territory to MS-2 in future redistricting cycles if further population trends continue in the Mississippi Delta. (Panola County, its neighbor to the east, was wholly incorporated into MS-2 in the last cycle.)

U.S. Census Bureau Demographic Information

Data Point	County	State
Population	51,318	2,992,206
Persons Per Square Mile	75	63.2
Voting age population	41,978	2,253,131
Persons 65 years and older	5,696	415,917
Median Household Income	\$43,328	\$39,031
High School Graduates in Adult Pop.	86.3%	81.5%
Bachelors Degree or Higher in Adult Pop.	37.2%	20.1%
African American Pop.	23.8%	37.4%
Number of Registered Voters 2.	27,820	

1. Data is for 2013 unless otherwise indicated. US Census Bureau (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/28/28161.html>)

2. 2012 Total Active NVRA Data 2012 <http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/> *Note: MS voter registration rolls are known for inaccuracies. Population over 18 is better indication of available voting age population.

With 51,318 inhabitants, the county is a relatively high population center in the state with 75.0 persons per square mile, appreciably above the average of 63.0 people per square mile in the state as a whole. Of that population, there are roughly 42,000 voters who are of age to vote, though the county reports only 27,820 registered active voters as of 2012 (NVRA 2012).

The county's population has an appreciable bias towards the 18-65 year cohort, correlating to the high number of University students and other professionals associated with the University of Mississippi. The overall racial composition differs from the state average, with 72.2% of residents being white and 23.8% black. The remaining percentage of the population is split between Hispanic/Latino and all other races. This is compared to the state average of 59.8% and 37.4% respectively.

The county also reports a higher educational achievement level than the rest of the state. The county's 86% high school education level among adults is on par with the nation's average and the county's bachelor degree or higher level exceeds national averages at 37.2%.

The higher educational achievement level corresponds to a higher average income for the county though there is a 3% upward tick in the county's poverty level versus the state level. Median household income in the county is \$43,328, which is \$4,297 higher than the state average of \$39,031 and \$10,000 less than the federal median.

Lafayette County was not redistricted in the past redistricting cycle, but shares similar characteristics to the neighboring counties of Panola and Yalobusha that were wholly incorporated into MS-2 from MS-1. Lafayette County and other border counties lie in the expansion path of MS-2. I was interested in the county chairs response considering their proximity to the Delta district and the influence of Oxford and the University of Mississippi on the politics of the county. Oktibbeha County, another county in my survey that did experience redistricting, is home to the state's other large public university, Mississippi State University.

AUTHOR NOTE: As part of my research, I produced a multimedia story reporting on the immediate after effects of the 2014 midterm elections in Lafayette County. As part of that report, I recorded on camera interviews with the Lafayette County party chairs. While I covered roughly the same topics in the interviews, the emphasis was on the results of the latest election and voter turnout. This focus may have influenced the types of responses I gathered. I also allow that the video interviews had a different dynamic than the phone interviews I described in my methodology, which may have influenced their responses.

DEMOCRATIC COUNTY CHAIR: Justin Cluck***County Chair Background******Role of the County Chair***

Justin Cluck is the Democratic Party chair for Lafayette County. His response to his role as a county chair was personal. “I had a son three years ago, and I decided that for his benefit, that I needed to get involved and make the world a better place for him to grow up.” This role led him naturally to politics in his county, he said. He leads the party’s fundraising and voter drives in the county in addition to administering the elections. They try to give 100 percent of what they raise to candidates, which means that they are constantly looking to increase their fundraising base for statewide elections. The county party also helps with “door knocking” and voter registration drives.

The ultimate goal of these efforts is voter awareness, he said. The county party hosts a variety of events towards this end. “We try to have events once a month to get local Democrats and people who want to get involved to get involved with the local party and to help encourage our candidates to run. We also help individual candidates with whatever they need. We stuff envelopes, knock on doors, put out signs, phone bank by calling people, write letters to the editor, not necessarily endorsing specific candidates, but trying to lay out the issues to voters,” Cluck said.

Methods to Reach Voters

Cluck emphasized the party’s role in getting out the vote in the county. He prefers “person to person contact” to reach voters. The party organizations hosts informal events to educate potential voters about the strengths of the party and to make connections. He calls the events “friendraisers.” “We want to let them know that there are people out there who will listen

to them, and their opinion... I think if people feel that way, and feel engaged in the process, then we will have higher voter turnouts,” Cluck said.

When asked about whether he thought other methods were effective, he pointed to word of mouth as his strongest asset. Other methods like TV commercials and mailers are simply not as effective. “Yes, (they) can make a difference, but if you go out and meet people, if you are invested in the candidate, and the cause, then I don’t think the mailing or the TV ads will have any impact,” Cluck said.

Cluck also stressed that he has to work to combat the negative associations people have with politics through the media. The negative images of politics projected by the media keep some people away. “That isn’t what politics is about. Politics is about people, about local issues and how it affects you,” Cluck said. His goal is to convince people to care about the results of the election. He promotes the idea of long-term consequences, especially for people who have children in the county. He points to his own son as an example. “It’s going to affect if he can go to a public school, a properly funded school, and get a good education there. It’s going to directly impact a lot of opportunities that he has in the future. If we continue to let our state legislature underfund education, you may not see the results now, but 10 years down the road, our public universities and our public high schools will be crumbling. The great effect of that is that employers won’t come to the state,” Cluck said.

Cluck thinks that if more people feel that their votes count that they will turnout to vote. He associates this response as a positive result for the Democratic party. “People go vote when they feel like they have a stake in the process... People feel apathetic, they think, ‘my vote doesn’t count. So why should I be engaged?’ We want to show them, that though you may feel like that on the national level- on a local level, your vote does count,” Cluck said.

Role of Competition

Cluck attributed a general lack of competition and no local races for the low turnout at the 2014 midterm elections. He also added that it could be attributed to the general dissatisfaction of people with the direction of politics in the U.S. However, he accepted responsibility for the low turnout in his county. “If turnout doesn’t go the way that you want it to, all responsibility falls to you,” Cluck said.

He attributes some of the problems that he had with turnout to low volunteer numbers. He relies on volunteers to help the party operate. Without volunteers, he is unable to reach out effectively. “Just like anybody, I have a full time job; I have to work to support my family. I go home and have responsibilities at home. I have to take time out to work in an election,” Cluck said. “I think that with the freedoms that we have, we have a responsibility to be involved with public life.”

He puts responsibility back on the Democratic Party in the state to make elections more competitive and to drive voter turnout. “Your responsibility as a member of the Democratic Party is to make the elections competitive. You have to get the candidate engaged with voters and get volunteers... If you don’t do that, then you’re going to sacrifice turnout,” Cluck said.

Cluck listed six things that a race and a candidate must have to have a competitive race against a Republican challenger. “First and foremost you have to have a good candidate. You have to have a candidate who is knowledgeable about the issues and more than anything cares about them. If you care about something, people see it in your face. It’s not just lip service or some fake politician on TV. If you really care about education and healthcare, people are going to know and understand it. They are going to feel apart of the campaign and empathize with you.

Second, “you have to have some money to make great voter contact.” Third, “candidates need a well laid plan.” Fourth, he says that it comes down to “who has the best ideas.” Fifth,

candidates need “direct voter turnout, direct communication and public forums.” Sixth, candidates have to be “getting supporters to the poll... You have to work to get those connections. You can’t just say ‘Democrats’ I need you to vote. You have to get out there and meet those people and see why they aren’t going to vote. If they have an impediment to voting (you have to) eliminate that impediment,” Cluck said.

Effect of Redistricting on Information Pathways

Lafayette has not been recently redistricted into a different House district, so Cluck did not speak on the effect of redistricting in his district.

REPUBLICAN COUNTY CHAIR: Geoffrey Yoste***Role of the County Chair***

Geoffrey Yoste is the Republican county chair for Lafayette County. He admits that the party at the county level takes a primarily administrative role that is somewhat foreign to him after being involved with campaigns in various capacities with current and former state GOP operatives. “(County chairs) functionally take an administrative role, probably even more than I like. After being involved in campaigns so much, I’m used to being in the middle of the fight. Whereas in the primary, we run the primary,” Yoste said.

Outside of this primarily administrative role, Yoste perceives a greater role to grow the party and promote the ideas of Republicanism at the local level. “The role of the party, in my mind, is to grow the party and to grow it at the local level. We have a great number of people in the county who vote very strong Republican, in statewide elections, but it just hasn’t gotten to the local elections,” Yoste said. He said that the party is working hard to get new and old voters alike to vote Republican in the county because they tend to vote Republican at the state or national level. The party also serves a support organization for candidates after the primary. Yoste connects candidates with resources to help them win: especially by identifying their voters.

Methods to Reach Voters

Yoste indicated that this role of identifying voters is key to finding new areas of support in the county. He also works to constantly educate voters about the differences in candidates. “One of the things that we do...is to help identify Republican voters and make sure that they get out there to vote and make sure that the Republican voters stay with the Republican candidates,”

Yoste said. “We just have a different set of public policy ideas... Frankly, Oxford is pretty purple. There’s not too hard red, not too hard blue, and it kind of meshes together.”

Yoste relies upon a network of community organizations to reach voters, some of which have direct ties to the University of Mississippi, which is located at the geographical and population center of the county in Oxford, Mississippi. “You’ve got to make sure that you’ve: A. got (the voters) registered, and B. got them to the polls,” Yoste said. “I tell you who does a great job on the ground game is the College Republicans. They’re always doing voter registration drives, which is very helpful.”

Role of Competition

Yoste mentioned that his county sees more of a battle between Republicans and Democrats than the demographics of his county would indicate. The University plays a strong part in that discrepancy. “We have a lot of people who work on campus that follow that idea of a college professor and lean to the left, so...it’s a battle, each year. You win some and lose some, but it’s a continuing battle to get people to vote Republican on the local level (in Lafayette County,” Yoste said.

Yoste said that competition in his county can go beyond party. Some candidates run as Democrat but are popular in the community, despite their political preferences. Others who run as Democrat do not want to come across as “switchers” and therefore “stick with what they’ve always done” and act as Republicans under the Democratic banner.

Yoste mentioned that the moderate turnout in the most recent midterm could be attributed to a few of the major candidates not having significant competition. The late Alan Nunnelee did not have any significant competition and neither did Sen. Thad Cochran, Yoste said. “What probably turned more people out in other pockets was the school board elections. Those aren’t

partisan, but they had three candidates up to vote for that race... Local stuff always makes it more interesting than the big stuff,” Yoste said.

Despite low competition levels in his county, Yoste attributed value to competition between candidates, especially in the primary. “Competition matters in sports and it matters in politics... There were a lot of people concerned for Senator Cochran (in the primary). They turned out and voted,” Yoste said. “I am a believer in party primaries. The winner is that much stronger when he rolls into the general race.... As long as it stays civil. We’ve both seen races that were not civil, and those don’t usually end well.”

Other Comments

Yoste echoed his Democratic counterparts struggles to overcome the negative perceptions of government. “(The voters) feel a little bit maligned, because (they think) “Hey, you asked me to vote for you, I voted for you, but now here you are doing this up there. You’re not doing that, or you’re shutting the government down. And people get fed up with it and they lose faith in the system itself. So once they get angry enough, this turns into going into the poll to do something about it,” Yoste said. “When they hear all the bad things going on in Washington: gridlock, or a member of Congress doing something illegal, or illicit, that gets their attention and they get disenchanted with that... They feel disenfranchised... Politics has just turned kind of ugly, and people want to stay away from it and don’t want to put their name on it.”

Despite this anger with the status quo, Yoste finds it difficult to channel it constructively. “Engaging voters is really important, but it’s challenging to do... people don’t want to get engaged till the week of the election. People are really busy... unless there’s a big issue.”

CHAPTER V: ONE PARTY RESPONSE COUNTY INTERVIEWS

OKTIBBEHA COUNTY

County Profile

Oktibbeha County is in the upper fourth of counties by population size in the state. Home to Starkville, Miss. And the state's second largest university, the county is roughly the same size as Lafayette County. Immediately prior to the 2011 redistricting cycle, Oktibbeha County was wholly situated within Mississippi's U.S. House District 3, a safe Republican district. After the 2011 redistricting cycle, the portions of Oktibbeha county to the west and north of Starkville were redistricted into U.S. House District 1, another safe Republican seat.

U.S. Census Bureau Demographic Information

Data Point	County	State
Population	49,043	2,992,206
Persons Per Square Mile	104	63.2
Voting age population	40,166	2,253,131
Persons 65 years and older	4,855	415,917
Median Household Income	\$30,987	\$39,031
High School Graduates in Adult Pop.	86.4%	81.5%
Bachelors Degree or Higher in Adult Pop.	42.6%	20.1%
African American Pop.	36.9%	37.4%
Number of Registered Voters 2.	27,820	

1. Data is for 2013 unless otherwise indicated. US Census Bureau (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/28/28161.html>)

2. 2012 Total Active NVRA Data 2012 <http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/> *Note: MS voter registration rolls are known for inaccuracies. Population over 18 is better indication of available voting age population.

With 49,043 inhabitants, the county is a relatively high population county with a higher population density reaching 104 persons per square mile. Of the total population, there are roughly 40,166 voters who are of age to vote, though the county did not report any registered voters to the NVRA survey as of 2012 (NVRA 2012). The county's population is weighted more heavily towards the 18-65 age group than the state average and is roughly representative of

the state's racial composition, with 58.6% white residents and 36.9% black residents with the remaining percentage of the population split between Hispanic/Latino and all other races.

The county also records a higher educational achievement level than the national average, with a slightly higher high school education rate (86.4%) and a significantly higher bachelors degree rate among those older than 25 years (42.6%). Mississippi's averages are 81.5% and 20.1%.

Despite the high level of educational achievement in the county, there is a much higher overall poverty level. However, the county's per-capita is roughly the same as the state average. Median household income in the county is \$30,987, which is \$8,044 short of the state average of \$39,031 and over \$22,000 less than the federal median.

DEMOCRATIC COUNTY CHAIR: Christopher Taylor***County Chair Background******Role of the County Chair***

Chris Taylor is the Democratic chair in Oktibbeha County. The county is situated fully within District 3, which is a safe Republican seat. Taylor sees his role as an information provider to the Democrats in his county. “My job as the county chair is to make sure that the Democrats in my county are well informed about what is going on with Democrats throughout the state and the nation,” Taylor said. “I relay information from the state executive, and one of the main things that I do is to find out who the Democrats are, and the only real way that you can do that is through the primary.” His county party’s organization works to educate voters on the “Democratic ideas.” “If I can educate you I can keep you voting Democrat. I can tell you anything, but if I don’t educate you on your ideology of the Democratic Party, which is different from what the Republicans say, then I am not doing my job,” Taylor said.

Methods to Reach Voters

Taylor mentions that he first tries to identify voters through voting records, but to expand those lists, he leads phone banks at the county level. “They’ll tell us whether they want to speak with us or not. We just go through and mark them off the list,” Taylor said. The county makes use of traditional word of mouth marketing too. They encourage members to invite friends to their monthly meetings. “We’ll tell people to invite 5 to 10 people. And then they’ll try to tell 5 to 10 and then they’ll tell 5 to 10, and it’s kind of like a pyramid scheme because if you can get people to commit,” Taylor said.

Taylor also visits area schools and colleges to recruit young members to build the party. He has little success converting younger people. “What ends up happening is that the old ladies

are the ones that end up doing the work,” Taylor said. Recruiting is sometimes difficult for Taylor given the varying, strong opinions of voters. “When I talk to them..., some people will hang up or say they don’t give a damn or nearly cuss ‘em out, don’t call this number no more,” Taylor said. “In some places you have split driveways. One side of them will be Republican, and the other Democrat. And they always fighting. A sign war. But they’re friends.”

Role of Competition

Taylor did not think that his county would benefit from more competition with Republicans in his county, primarily because he saw Republicans having more resources. “I don’t think (competition) would help us. I think the Republicans have more money and can do more things. I hate to say buying people off, but that’s what they do.”

Taylor says that candidates who can bring a strong message to their campaign have a higher chance of success. “It’s just like Tea Party with Chris McDaniel,” Taylor said. “If he came in with the right message, I don’t think Cochran would have beat him... It would have been him against Childers.”

He welcomes the rise of Tea Party candidates in his county because he feels that his Democratic candidates are more competitive against their Tea Party counterparts. “The other Republicans don’t want to associate with them,” Taylor said. Taylor believes that Democrats benefited from some crossover voting of both whites and Republican. He thinks that successful Democratic candidates in his district have to “be able to bring something to the table. The person with the ideas and is all about education and what you can do for my people, then that person can win.”

Effect of Redistricting on Information Pathways

Taylor did not see any effects from the 2011 redistricting cycle on his county. The number of affected precincts was very low he said, and he didn't change his strategy to accommodate them. "My county has a little bit of a split, but with roughly 28,000 voters only 2000 or less are in District 1. So it really doesn't make a difference," Taylor said.

Taylor admits that he does send one person to cover the affected precincts, but he said that campaigns tend to ignore the affected counties. "If I'm campaigning, we're really not going to worry about that... the priority then in District 3, 100 percent," Taylor said. "Alan Nunnelee did not spend one dime on thinking about Oktibbeha County."

He also notes challenges with overcoming voters' negative perceptions of politics. "The (representatives) that go to Washington, (the voters) don't see them, and they don't think that they care. The only thing that you see is fighting," Taylor said. Taylor questioned how so many of the state's eligible voters did not participate in the election. "If I'm not mistaken... there were 29% statewide.... Where are the other 70%? ... They're not well informed. They might as well stay home," Taylor said.

MADISON COUNTY

County Profile

Madison County is a populous Mississippi county in the central part of the state. It borders the Mississippi Delta on the north and the state capital city of Jackson on the south. The county is split between U.S. House District 2 and U.S. House District 3. House District 2 claims most of the northern part of the county, leaving the population centers of Madison and Ridgeland primarily to U.S. House District 3. District 2 wraps around to the south of the county incorporating a major part of the capital city and the more rural parts to the south, extending along the Mississippi River south towards the coast. Madison County is the most “split” county in the state.

U.S. Census Bureau Demographic Information

Data Point	County	State
Population	100,412	2,992,206
Persons Per Square Mile	133.2	63.2
Voting age population	74,405	2,253,131
Persons 65 years and older	11,849	415,917
Median Household Income	\$59,904	\$39,031
High School Graduates in Adult Pop.	89.2%	81.5%
Bachelors Degree or Higher in Adult Pop.	45.8%	20.1%
African American Pop.	38.5%	37.4%
Number of Registered Voters 2.	80,588	

1. Data is for 2013 unless otherwise indicated. US Census Bureau (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/28/28161.html>)

2. 2012 Total Active NVRA Data 2012 <http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/> *Note: MS voter registration rolls are known for inaccuracies. Population over 18 is better indication of available voting age population.

With over 100,000 residents, Madison County is among the state’s largest counties. Of that population, there are roughly 74,000 voters who are of age to vote, though the county reports over 80,000 eligible active voters as of 2012 (NVRA 2012). The county’s population is slightly younger than the state average, though the overall racial composition is very close the state

average, with 57.8% white and 38.5% black residents with the remaining percentage of the population split between Hispanic/Latino and all other races.

The county also records a significantly higher educational achievement level than the rest of the state, with 89.2% of people over 25 holding a high school diploma and 45.8% a bachelors degree or higher. Mississippi's averages are 81.5% and 20.1%. Madison County's averages compare favorably to the national averages of 86% and 28.8% respectively.

The higher level of education corresponds to a significantly lower overall poverty levels and higher per-capita and household incomes than the state average. Median household income in the county is \$59,904, which is more than \$20,000 higher than state average of \$39,031 and nearly \$7,000 more than the federal median.

REPUBLICAN COUNTY CHAIR: John Taylor***County Chair Background******Role of the County Chair***

John Taylor is the Madison County Republican Party chair. He operates one of the larger county organizations in the state and is uniquely positioned to split his time and effort between two major parts of the county situated in two completely different U.S. House Districts. He spoke first of his statutory role and his role within the state party. On a different level, he stated that he believes his role is to “grow the party and get people involved and to execute and spread the message of the Republican Party.”

While he did not directly state it, Taylor demonstrated that he is responsible for kick starting projects in the county that would not have happened without a leader. While past county chairs “talked” about different programs, Taylor has been able to execute his plans successfully.

Methods to Reach Voters

Taylor relies upon many minor methods within a larger strategy to reach voters. At the macro level, Taylor spoke about his efforts to make the Republican Party an active participant in the community. The county party, with the help of the Republican Women chapter, leads voter registration drives at all the local high schools. “This past election, we did maybe 300 high school seniors and juniors who were going to be voting age by the time of the election,” Taylor said.

Taylor also maintains active connections with community organizations that are not politically affiliated. He mentioned his work with a youth leadership council that encourages students to take an active role in state government. Taylor said that these meetings are not

Republican or Democratic, but that the group excites him about the future of the leadership in the state.

His community connections help him reach out and drive interest in party events. One major event is the county fundraiser. After three years of the event, Taylor said that they'll have \$50,000 in the county's campaign account and a much stronger county party. "We'll have 4, 5, or 600 people and have a big dinner and a speaker to come in. Last year we had Tom Cotton, who just got elected in Arkansas Senate," Taylor said. "We're one of the few counties that actually puts an event on like that."

Taylor emphasizes the importance of working in a county that is involved and active in their government. The involvement helps him recruit volunteers and grow the party as the county grows. In the City of Madison alone, the population has gone from 5,000 people to over 28,000 citizens. "I think people care about their kids, and their schools, and a lot more that they put into schools and local government," Taylor said. "We try to preach that this is a great place to work and play. We kind of use Hinds County as an example of what kind of county that you will get if you don't care about your government. Your waterlines are busting and things like that. We have a lot of building restrictions and covenants. I know that in one district, there are 65 homeowners associations. That is a lot of people involved in a representative's district. "

To recruit volunteers, Taylor relies upon key groups. One major group is the Republican Women of Madison County. Though he notes that the group has split recently over the most recent midterm, he sees them rebuilding soon and repairing relationships as they gear up for the statewide races. "I just have a farm team of people that want to get involved. The Republican Women really, up until recently were very instrumental and the heart of the party in Madison County. They were the heels on the ground, no pun intended, that got these things done. It

recently fractured with the last election, and split off and a lot of people went off, and it's now in the process of rebuilding. But I have had a group of people from the get go to get stuff done in the Republican Women," Taylor said.

Role of Competition

When asked about the role of competition in driving people to the polls, Taylor responded with a discussion about how the county is changing as it grows. As more people move in from surrounding counties, they are bringing their voting patterns with them. "There has always been Republican/ Democrat competition. We're still 60-40 Republican, but headed towards 45," Taylor said "(Democrats) are moving here for the better roads and schools, but they're continuing to vote like they did in Hinds County."

He said that if the trends continue, the strong infrastructure that has attracted new citizens may not remain a priority. He says that strong interparty support between traditional and Tea Party Republicans is necessary to keep the tide from turning. "We were at a place where we were all working together, but now (the Tea Party) have grown impatient, and they want something done now. They are getting anxious and conflicts are starting," Taylor said.

For Taylor, competition can be positive, but he fears some members are shirking the challenge. "People are getting excited about the elections, but the losers are going back in the fetal position. They don't handle defeat well," Taylor said. "It is a difference between people who know the difference between a marathon and a sprint."

Taylor claims that he is no stranger to patching over sour relationships. His first job after he was elected to a position at the state party level was to get his challenger back with the party. Taylor's method mirrors his favorite method of reaching voters: personal outreach. He also mentioned that he does not let opposition to his leadership trouble him. "I don't pick fights with

anyone, call any names or get anxious about it,” Taylor said. “It would be tough for someone to defeat me, because I’m out there in all the precincts talking and if I need to I can call them into the county convention to get them to vote for me. It’s not going to be easy.”

Taylor stated that the same problem is occurring at the state party level. The state party chair, Joe Nosef was “dealt a bad hand” with the recent Tea Party disputes. “He played it the best way that he could, but I told him in conversations, with him and the governor, as far as I’m concerned, it’s your responsibility to heal this wound,” Taylor said.

Taylor also discussed what it took to make elections competitive at the county level. His primary objective when planning election strategy is to choose a good candidate to run for the position. After the candidates declare, Taylor ensures that the election is run flawlessly to ensure a positive experience for his candidates.

“I’m not a campaign expert, but people do come to me for advice. They ask, ‘What should I do first? Second?’ I try to give them basics and send them in the right direction, and if they want to spend money on consultants, I point them to the right direction depending on what they want to spend. After that, I focus on putting on a good election, so that nobody gets mad. I get the best poll workers that I can and make sure that they’re trained the best that I can. The worst thing is to have a microphone in your face on election day wanting to know why someone didn’t show up or why these people are doing it this way, and why this guys name wasn’t on the ballot ... it can throw the election one way or the other.”

He also noted that as more people from Hinds County move in, the general rule that the person who wins the primary will also win the general election is fading. “I think that the truth in Madison County is that the Hinds County people are moving in and that gap that we had for victory is getting smaller and smaller everyday.” Taylor said. “The day is going to come with.... people moving in that people will have to be on their a game for the election. They can’t just assume from the primary. They’re going to have to get out there just as hard as they did in the primary.”

Effect of Redistricting on Information Pathways

While Taylor did not specifically comment on his actions before and after the most recent election cycle, he did offer some insights into operating in a county that is split so much between two competing House Districts with very different priorities. “I see that some of Democratic precincts, you’ll never get a Republican vote there. These Democrat precincts you’re just lucky to get out alive sometimes. I go to all of them, make sure that there isn’t cheating, and I make them take the Bennie t-shirt off and what have you, but there’s some places that you don’t waste your time and don’t waste your money on. That is just the reality of the situation.”

Taylor mentioned the difficulty of reaching out to communities with traditional Democratic bases. Community leaders who hold a great deal of power over the local conversation lead these areas.

“The tradition that I have seen ... is the black churches push their flock one way or the other. They allow politicking to go on. On a micro level, it is a little bit easier for them to get away with it, like with the Cochran thing. I was out in the eastern part of the county in a Democratic precinct, and all of sudden, we start getting tons of African Americans wanting to vote in the Republican primary, but they had already voted in the Democratic primary and they were hostile about it. But we told them that you can’t cross party lines in a run off, but they had fliers in their hand telling me ‘I was told that I could do this.’ I asked where they had gotten these fliers and they told me that they had gotten them in the churches. So these black preachers, they hold a lot of power to push their flock one way or the other.”

Even in the Democratic precincts where many of Taylor’s poll-workers are actually Democrat, he makes an effort to connect with them personally. “I send Christmas cards to all my poll-workers, because I want to stay in touch with them and let them know that I appreciate them. Maybe I’ll get one out of 220 who will run for office,” Taylor said.

This personal approach is the only approach that Taylor employs to reach out to traditional Democrats in his county. He picks the best workers for the polls that he can find, Republican or Democrat. “I don’t know any other approach,” Taylor said. “The only thing is

name and face recognition. I hire Democrat poll workers where I have to, but only the best ones. I don't just put up with everybody. They don't lean one way or the other with elections, they know how important it is to be neutral."

Other Topics

Taylor has just one criticism of the current party structure in the state. He hopes that the state party will make more use of the county chairmen in the future. "(The county chairs) are kind of wasted. The state party needs to, a good state chairman needs to work with county chairs in getting things done in their counties and building the party at that level. Joe has been swamped, but I never hear from Joe Nosef. There is a big issue, but I think the state leadership needs to come out of the capitol and get out into the counties. You just got to get out there and build it from the grassroots up, and I just don't think that's being done."

PANOLA COUNTY

County Profile

Panola County is in the upper half of counties by population. This county is located in the northern part of the state straddling the border of the Mississippi Delta. Immediately prior to the 2011 redistricting cycle, Panola County was wholly situated within Mississippi's U.S. House District 1, which is a current Republican seat and contains the northern corner of the state east of the Delta. After the 2011 redistricting cycle, Yalobusha was wholly incorporated into U.S. House District 2, the longtime district of Democrat Bennie Thompson and the state's only majority-minority (black) U.S. House District.

U.S. Census Bureau Demographic Information

Data Point	County	State
Population	34,402	2,992,206
Persons Per Square Mile	50.7	63.2
Voting age population	25,457	2,253,131
Persons 65 years and older	4,782	415,917
Median Household Income	\$35,715	\$39,031
High School Graduates in Adult Pop.	75.8%	81.5%
Bachelors Degree or Higher in Adult Pop.	14.3%	20.1%
African American Pop.	48.8%	37.4%
Number of Registered Voters 2.	24,155	

1. Data is for 2013 unless otherwise indicated. US Census Bureau
(<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/28/28161.html>)

2. 2012 Total Active NVRA Data 2012 <http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/> *Note: MS voter registration rolls are known for inaccuracies. Population over 18 is better indication of available voting age population.

With 34,402 inhabitants the county is a mid size county with a population density reaching 50.7 persons per square mile. Of the total population number, there are roughly 25,400 voters who are of age to vote, and the county reports 24,155 eligible active voters as of 2012 (NVRA 2012). The county's population racial composition is split nearly evenly between black

and white residents (48.8% vs. 49.6%) with the remaining percentage of the population split between Hispanic/Latino and all other races.

The county also records a lower educational achievement level than the rest of the state. Mississippi's averages are 81.5% and 20.1%. Panola County's is 75.8% and 14.3%

The lower educational achievement gap corresponds to a higher overall poverty level and lower per-capita income than either state or national levels. Median household income in the county is \$35,715, which is \$3316 short of the state average of \$39,031 and over \$17,000 less than the federal median.

REPUBLICAN COUNTY CHAIR: Kimberly Jones

County Chair Background

Role of the County Chair

Kimberly Jones is the outgoing county party chair for Panola County. Her interview was unique in that she was the most upset about her county's redistricting of any of the other county party chairs that I spoke to. While she acknowledged that she had a role in the county of increasing local participation among Republicans, she also pointed to a divide between what she wants to do and what she is actually able to do in her role. She points to a disintegrating Republican institution in Panola County as the root of her problems. "I accepted this position in April and (the party members) all scattered. Nobody wants to deal with it because they don't know where to get the information from. One person can't do it. ... I could wear a sign, but it really hasn't sunk in. All their concern is with what they know and they want to keep that money coming in to Mississippi...The Republican Party abandoned Panola County," Jones said. "I have to say that because I'm the chair, but it goes much deeper than that."

Jones has taken on the role of policing the entire county's voting institutions for corruption. She indicated that she believed no one in the current party system was following the election code properly or even cared to try.

"I had to police everything and I threw a fit about everyone following the rules. The Democratic chair won't even be in the same room as me because I threw a fit about following the rules. I can't police everyone. No one wants to read the law; no one wants to follow the code. And the only way that I knew what to do is because I said, 'Oh you know, let's look at what the code says.' And I started getting resistance. Nobody wanted me to follow the law. I came in like Attila the Hun, guns slinging, and I made it through. There's corruption, from top down."

Jones confessed that she was about to resign because she felt that she could be more effective in another role. "I have my letter of resignation," Jones said. "I think people would

probably listen to me as a regular person rather than as someone representing the party, especially knowing that the party is going in that direction. Sorry GOP, unfortunately this is the opinion of many, many people... It's sad because it leaves us without a voice and leaves Panola county without a voice."

Methods to Reach Voters

Despite her plans to leave office, I still asked Jones about her methods to reach out to the party. She said that it comes down to communicating the benefits of the party to voters. "That's been a difficult thing to do since this last election. It has had a tremendous impact. I haven't been in the position long enough to see how it was before, but from what I can tell, it hasn't changed. It's definitely a challenge to encourage people to want to vote Republican, even though they are conservative," Jones said.

She indicated that at a local level, her county and much of Mississippi is Democratic. She said that this is confusing. She thinks that there are people on the Democratic side that share many of the ideals of the Republican party, but they don't realize that they do. "There are probably five topics that if you are a conservative that we could agree on. It would be my goal to show them that. I have to get them to think about why they vote Democrat," Jones said. "You're not considering your convictions. And so that is a huge brick wall. It has been really challenging to bring people over to the Republican side."

Besides trying to convince Democrats in her county to support Republicans, Jones noted that she conducted meetings with the few members remaining in the county party organization. She indicated that the party members had little to no support for any of her ideas, including a cocktail party or mixer to drum up support for the party. "It's really hard to convince that

generation that, ladies and gentlemen we need to face the facts. They just don't want to hear it," Jones said.

She mentioned that these same people were the ones she had to police during the elections. She claimed that they knowingly committed illegal acts during the election and that she hated that they were so entrenched in the party.

I asked about other methods she might use to reach voters and she responded that her county did not have the funding to do other traditional methods. She also described a culture of laziness in the party. "Politics takes effort, and what I've noticed in Panola County is that conservatives are, most of them, not all, are uneducated, and believe that the government will take care of them. They rest on their laurels. They don't want the hassle. They don't want to have to disrupt their routine, it's in their nature."

She also indicated that she felt that there was an age gap between the entrenched members of her county party and potential new members that was insurmountable. "I've tried to get people my age. They're more knowledgeable about what is really taking place, but ... that age group will have nothing to do with the GOP," Jones said. "Their attitude is that the old man needs to sit down and let the new generation take over. That's a lot of their attitude. These people are with themselves. They're my cohorts; they're the people in the county. "

Role of Competition

Jones comments on competition in her county were brief. "If you don't run Democrat, then you won't win. Period," Jones said. "It's true, if you are a Republican facing a Democrat, you will lose. It's a blue dog conservatives voting bloc. The races aren't close."

Effect of Redistricting on Information Pathways

Jones had more to say about the effect of redistricting on her county. Though she was not county chair during the 2011 redistricting cycle, she has followed the process in her county.

Panola's switch from a Republican district to Bennie Thompson's District 2 concerned her the most. She mentioned that she felt abandoned by the Republican Party in Mississippi.

"The redistricting automatically put my county in a direction that is not in our best interest. We had no say so, obviously, and people know why. People are starting to figure out why. They're starting to realize why they're being left behind. They're coming to town halls; they're coming with torches. I think the people of Panola County feel very betrayed by the Mississippi Republican Party, because Panola County, by all accounts, is conservative."

Jones continued about the nature of operating in Thompson's District 2. She offered the general maintenance of District 2 as an example of the differing views of the two areas.

"There's no Republican support or financials, or advertising. Nothing. Now given the voting record of a representative like Bennie Thompson, he has a lot of power. But the people of Panola have the nice lawns; they have their homes that are like their castles. And you look at people that are under his jurisdiction; they don't want that to happen to Panola County. That is the only evidence that they have to go on because most of the people around here are middle aged and up. Many of them don't have computers or Internet access. That's the way that they see. ... People are upset."

Jones extended commentary on the characteristics of Bennie Thompson's District 2 made clear her feelings of impotence in the face of party who had "abandoned her" to a district that she did not think represented her interests.

MARION COUNTY

County Profile

Marion County is a medium sized county on the southern border of the state with Louisiana. The Pearl River splits this county roughly in half. Immediately prior to the 2011 redistricting cycle, Marion County was split between Mississippi's U.S. House District 3 and U.S. House District 4, both of which are current Republican seats. After the 2011 redistricting cycle, Marion was wholly incorporated into U.S. House District 4.

U.S. Census Bureau Demographic Information

Data Point	County	State
Population	26,180	2,992,206
Persons Per Square Mile	49.9	63.2
Voting age population	19,714	2,253,131
Persons 65 years and older	4,189	415,917
Median Household Income	\$29,400	\$39,031
High School Graduates in Adult Pop.	74.3%	81.5%
Bachelors Degree or Higher in Adult Pop.	13.2%	20.1%
African American Pop.	32.5%	37.4%
Number of Registered Voters 2.	17,539	
1. Data is for 2013 unless otherwise indicated. US Census Bureau (http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/28/28161.html)		
2. 2012 Total Active NVRA Data 2012 http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/ *Note: MS voter registration rolls are known for inaccuracies. Population over 18 is better indication of available voting age population.		

With 26,180 inhabitants, the county is a mid size county with a population density reaching 49.9 persons per square mile. In the county, there are roughly 19,700 voters who are of age to vote, though the county reports just 17,539 registered active voters as of 2012 (NVRA 2012). The county's population is slightly older than the state average and slightly whiter than the state as a whole with 66.1% of the population white and 9.8% black compared to the state average of 59.8% and 37.4% respectively.

The county also records a lower educational achievement level than the rest of the state. Mississippi's averages are 81.5% and 20.1%. Marion County's is just 74.3% and 13.2%

The lower educational achievement gap corresponds to a higher overall poverty level and significantly lower per-capita income than either state or national levels. Median household income in the county is \$29,400, which is \$9,631 short of the state average of \$39,031 and over \$23,000 less than the federal median.

REPUBLICAN COUNTY CHAIR: Kay Patterson

County Chair Background

Role of the County Chair

Kay Patterson is the Republican Party chair for Marion County. While she stated her primary role was administering the polls, she recognizes that her role is larger than being an administrator. She works year round on various initiatives that directly support her work as a county chair. “I’m also on the Republican Women, and we don’t have enough people in the party per se to do it, so the Republican Women, which is men and women, ...they’re the ones that end up supporting our candidates. We get our speakers together and run it as the Republican Women and the party,” Patterson said.

Patterson indicated that she got interested in the activities of the party through the Republican Women. “It just goes together is what it does,” Patterson said. Patterson mentioned that she is main driver of many of the Republican Women and the county party’s activities.

“I kind of do it all. During the election, you have to start getting your ballots approved. You have to get all of your inventory supplies, your ballot boxes, your labels and what kinds of machines you’re going to use. You have to have the number of poll managers you’re going to use, meet with circuit clerks, and then we have to initially approve the ballots. Then we begin appointing poll managers because they all have to go to school... I’m the one that gets out and takes care of when we have fundraising or any other kind of program...On election days, I go out to every precinct that we have. By that time, the day has just about ended and we grab something to eat and start processing the affidavit ballots. Then we count everything that night. I go by and see if they need any help. Of course, if they have a problem, they go ahead and call us.”

Methods to Reach Voters

With the Republican Women being described as a central driver of her activities, I asked her what she does with the Republican Women to drive interest in the party, especially considering the nearly equal ratio of men to women in the organization. “Once a month, we all get together and do a potluck dinner. We include the men and the women in that and we try to

find people that will come and speak to us. Someone from government or who will be running for office or it could be one of our senators or representatives who wants to get something out to us with what's going on and things we want to do in the community. We collect books for the library, we do things for the veterans, we do all kinds of things for the public," Patterson said.

The group tries to grow the party at the local level through outreach activities. "We invite people to come and hear what we are all about," Patterson said. "Different Republicans will come to speak, but we try to be informative, where they know what we stand for and what we're doing... We have a good bunch of ladies who work in our community."

Patterson described the group's primary outreach activity as a yearly meeting where members will personally invite friends to join the group. "That's actually how I got involved, back in the 80s. One thing led to another, and then I was president several times over, and Wayne Powell who was the county chair here quit, and actually there was no one else who would take it so I took it. I definitely did not have any idea of what I was getting into."

She noted a deep integration of the membership of the Republican Women with the membership of the county party organization. "The Republican women and the county organization are made up of the same people, if they are allowed to be. They help me just as much as I help the Republican Women. (For example,) I have a lady that is kind of a shut in. Any time that we need a phone bank, she's the first one to do it. And I have other ones too."

She joins other county chairs in mentioning word of mouth as the best method to reach voters. "I've never found anything that word of mouth isn't the best thing to do. Word of mouth is the best thing you can do."

She draws upon her personal experience as a real estate agent and her connections to the community to reach out. "Even when selling real estate, word of mouth is the best thing that you

can do. In my job, I know most everyone around town and I get to talking with them. Even in my job I do a little bit of soliciting. Just like I do for my church. My church comes first. Politics comes next. I'm really active in my church, and even my church lets me use the kitchen down in the fellowship hall for some of our meetings, as a place to hold people."

She notes the primary power of word of mouth is its personal connection to people. People who learn about a candidate will spread information to their acquaintances, positively or negatively. "You've got to be careful about how you handle (word of mouth) because it really works. Of course, we've got a small county, so it's not that hard to reach out," Patterson said.

Role of Competition

Patterson discounts the effect of competition in her county. She points to the variety of countywide and local offices held by Republican in her county. She notes that races are competitive still at some level, but "elections go my way now." "I used to be a Democrat a long time ago, but they went off and left me a long time ago, Patterson said. "Some people feel the exact same way that I feel, but then you've got other ones who are strictly Democrat and they're not going to change. But you also have white and black who wants what I want and they vote Republican."

Marion County was not immune to the Tea Party problems that other Republican county chairs have experienced. She acknowledged a split but was positive about the future of the party. "I think there definitely was a split this year. But I've never seen that before until this year. But I don't think that's a problem now. There were people saying to vote for Childers and that they were going to do that, but they all came back and voted Republican... You can agree to disagree, but we all come back together," Patterson said. Despite the contention at the midterms, she saw

lower overall turnout. She attributes the loss of voters to a lack of presidential and statewide elections.

She indicated that the key to Republican remaining competitive at the state level lay in them continuing to win at the local level.

“When I first started, we hardly had anyone who was Republican. We just started turning people over one at a time until we were done. And we still need to get some more...If you don’t have people running on the county level that are Republican, then you won’t have people voting for people on the state and national level. It’ll be Democrat at the end... It’s very important for us to get our county where they vote Republican the first time.”

When asked about the positive or negative nature of competition in her county, she indicated that she appreciates competitive races during the primaries because they drive turnout. She recognizes that candidates would prefer to run unopposed, but that the increased turnout is positive overall.

Effect of Redistricting on Information Pathways

Patterson has been active in the county for many years. She noticed how the county’s complete integration into U.S. House District has made her job easier. “The redistricting didn’t really bother us this time. The redistricting wasn’t bad at all for us,” Patterson said. “Actually, we kind of like it that way... It’s a lot easier on us when we have the district, because when it’s split we have to be really careful to clear up the confusion. Especially with our poll workers. They did away with that, and it made my job much easier... Now we only have to program one card period. It takes a lot less time.... We don’t have extra time.”

JASPER COUNTY

County Profile

Jasper County is a relatively rural county in the southern part of the state located three counties east of the state capital in Jackson. Its largest city and one of its county seats is Bay Springs with 1,786 people (2010 Census Redistricting Data). Immediately prior to the 2011 redistricting cycle, Jasper county was split significantly between Mississippi's U.S. House District 3 and House District 4 which are both current Republican seats and encompass the entire southern part of the state from the Coast north to Jackson and east to the Mississippi River. After the 2011 redistricting cycle, Jasper was wholly incorporated into U.S. House District 3.

U.S. Census Bureau Demographic Information

Data Point	County	State
Population	16,470	2,992,206
Persons Per Square Mile	25.2	63.2
Voting age population	12,632	2,253,131
Persons 65 years and older	2,948	415,917
Median Household Income	\$31,170	\$39,031
High School Graduates in Adult Pop.	76.6%	81.5%
Bachelors Degree or Higher in Adult Pop.	12.9%	20.1%
African American Pop.	52.2%	37.4%
Number of Registered Voters 2.	12,740	

1. Data is for 2013 unless otherwise indicated. US Census Bureau (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/28/28161.html>)

2. 2012 Total Active NVRA Data 2012 <http://www.eac.gov/registration-data/> *Note: MS voter registration rolls are known for inaccuracies. Population over 18 is better indication of available voting age population.

With 16,470 inhabitants, the county is a low population county with low population density reaching just 25.2 persons per square mile. Of that number, there are roughly 12,632 voters who are of age to vote, though the county reports 12,740 registered active voters as of 2012 (NVRA 2012). The county's population is older than the state average and the county has

more black residents than white (52.2% vs. 46.7%) with the remaining percentage of the population split between Hispanic/Latino and all other races.

The county also records a lower educational achievement level than the rest of the state. Mississippi's averages are 81.5% and 20.1%. Jasper County's is 76.6% and 12.9% respectively.

The lower educational achievement gap does not correspond to a lower overall poverty level though it does correspond to lower per-capita income than either state or national levels. Median household income in the county is \$31,170, which is \$7,861 short of the state average of \$39,031 and nearly \$22,000 less than the federal median.

DEMOCRATIC COUNTY CHAIR: Marcelean Arrington***County Chair Background******Role of the County Chair***

Marcelean Arrington is the Democratic Party chair for Jasper County. She identified her primary role as being a mouthpiece for the party in her county. “My mission is to elect Democrat and to certify our candidates. That’s our mission as Democrat. We’re also supposed to register Democrat and to make Democrat aware of the election process.”

In addition to her work with Democratic voters she also takes an active role in helping candidates. “That’s our mission. To help (the candidates) in their campaign to register Democrat and to help them in their campaign.”

Methods to Reach Voters

Arrington relies upon “educational” meetings and community organizations to communicate her message and connect her with people in the county. “During the primary time, we try to conduct educational meetings. We go out to the schools and try to get young people registered and explain to them why they need to vote. We have a new person that does that. Then you have we have our monthly meeting at the end of the month and we may have an activity and invite people to participate in the process and through that we get people to come.”

She indicated that the precinct captains are critical to her county operations. “In our precincts, we have a captain, and that captain is responsible for communicating to his people how to vote and if they need a ride to the polls. We go door to door, we do the telephone, and we have people who help. The precinct people are really the people who contact people because they are the ones who know the people in their precinct. If you get that precinct organized, then people in that precinct are going to tell the people. The precinct people we really depend on.”

She relies upon a branching tree of contacts to spread the party's reach in Jasper. One connection at the county level leads to a precinct contact and that contact connects them with the voters. "In my committee, we have a person that is in that precinct and it is their job to find other people in that precinct, who volunteer to help. That's how we select them. They volunteer... People like to feel good. Especially if they know you personally, if they are more comfortable with you. So that's why we try to use those people in the precinct, they will accept you if it is coming from somebody in their precinct. "

This social network is important to her work as it helps her allocate resources effectively. "You have to get people in who will volunteer. We don't have a lot of money, so we have to have volunteers." She believes that working in a small county helps her party organization connect with voters. "I personally think that larger counties can do it as well. We are a smaller county so that is the only way that we know how. Because we are smaller we can do that, but a larger county can do it too."

Despite having a small county with few resources, Arrington still makes use of fundraisers to support the party's operations. The money goes towards supporting candidates during the general election. Many times this support is in the form of flyers that the organization distributes to volunteers who go door to door or visit church groups. "We like to have a little bit of information to give to people," Arrington said. The flyers contain basic information like how to vote, where polling locations are located and information about the county party organization.

When asked about what community organizations she may rely upon to help the county party, she initially responded, "Basically, we do it on our own. We are a small county." She clarified her statement and gave credit to the citizens of the county. "Citizens do it for us. They educate. They educate people about how to vote, the voting process, who's who in the process.

It's something that everybody might know, but some people don't know. They are teaching them the basics, and then they can talk about politics," Arrington said.

She also added that churches are key to her operations. "Churches are the main resource that we have. That's the way to get information out, is at churches... Precinct captains will be a member of that church or he will go to that church, and announce it in church or they will put it in the bulletin and they'll announce the Election Day. Maybe you might have someone who doesn't work, but they'll hear it at church. If they see that, they'll get out."

She indicated that the churches connected many involved members of the community in one place. It is a natural place to educate voters. "You have a group of people there, and most of the people there are individuals that work in the community. They are going to go back to the community and tell them. They'll tell one friend, and then another friend and you know it's kind of informal, but they'll tell them and get them to the polls. You get that in churches," Arrington said.

Role of Competition

Arrington does not see much competition in her county. She spoke about a lack of candidates interested in running for office in her county. At the local level, she sees more interest in running for office, but she still does not see much competition for offices. She points to the Democratic leanings of her rural county. "Well, it's a Republican state, but in my area, it's all Democrat. We are all Democrat. So, it doesn't seem to be a problem with anyone that we see. Local people vote Democrat."

She said that the roots of her county's attraction to the Democratic Party go back many years. The party, she said, is the party of education and healthcare, two issues that her voters care

a lot about. “We’re here to help people in need... If you don’t have healthcare, then you can’t help education, so you have to have both. People have to be able to function.”

She indicated that people in her county will turnout for the local primaries, though it drops off for the general elections. “They go out for the primary, I guess because it is local, then when it comes to the general, there is less turnout. It goes down a bit. There is less competition. I think every election is different. I think it is the person that is running what kind of character they have.”

Effect of Redistricting on Information Pathways

Arrington does not attribute much of a change to the redistricting of her county. She indicated that the affected area was so small that her operations were not affected.

CHAPTER VI: INTERVIEW RESPONSE ANALYSIS

The interviews in the previous chapters demonstrate a wide variety of responses to the four basic questions that I asked of the county chairs. What follows is a discussion of the types of responses that I gathered in context with what the party chairs said.

Role of the County Chair

As I opened my interviews with this question, I start with a discussion of how county chairs perceived their role in the county. While all of the county chairs recognized a primary responsibility to carry out their statutory responsibility of administering primary elections in the county, most county chairs also recognized that their roles went beyond that of a simple administrator. County chairs found themselves acting as community organizers, volunteer recruiters, referees, party builders, campaign coaches or voter educators. These varying roles helped county chairs maintain a flow of information to voters in their areas and get out the vote when necessary.

Statutory Responsibility

As elected leaders of the county executive committee, county party chairs are responsible for administering all parts of a primary election. By their very nature, the county executive committees have a largely administrative role in elections. The Mississippi Code lays out specific requirements and timelines that county chairs have to enforce in their counties. Below is a section from the code that indicates the primary responsibilities of the chair.

§ 23-15-263. Duties of county executive committees at primary elections

(1) Unless otherwise provided in this chapter, the county executive committee at primary elections shall perform all duties that relate to the qualification of candidates for primary elections, print ballots for primary elections, appoint the primary election officers, resolve contests in regard to primary elections, and perform all other duties required by law to be performed by the county executive committee; however, each house of the Legislature shall rule on the qualifications of the membership of its respective body in contests involving the qualifications of such members. The executive committee shall be

subject to all the penalties to which county election commissioners are subject, except that Section 23-15-217 shall not apply to members of the county executive committee who seek elective office. (Miss. Code Ann. § 23-15-263 (2014))

Nearly all the county chairs I spoke to emphasized that a well-run, efficient election was imperative for supporting their parties. John Taylor, the Republican chair of Madison County went so far as to say that administering elections appropriately could “throw the election one way or the other,” for his candidates, so he emphasizes making sure that the ballot is complete and that the poll workers are well trained to avoid attracting unnecessary negative attention that could call the results of an election into question by the media or other questioning bodies.

To organize an election effectively, the county chairs pointed to the importance of having a well organized, regularly attending executive committee and a network of county officials that they could rely upon. Regular frustrations included a dearth of qualified volunteers, low attendance at the countywide monthly meetings and even executive board members that resisted the initiatives of the county chair. Larry Coleman, the Democratic chair from Jones County, uses his board’s social networks to reach out to community, so he says that having a strong executive board is one of his primary concerns. In counties where the executive board was not as strong or nearly non-existent, the county chairs recognized a difficulty organizing their counties and being effective leaders. Kim Jones, the Panola County Republican chair in a county with a strong Democratic presence, met resistance at every step from her board, she said. A self described “Yankee,” Jones had trouble relating to the older, members of her executive board.

Jones went even further in her statement about the lack of functionality of her executive board when she discussed their lack of support for the Mississippi Code and the enforcement of election laws. She noted that she perceived her committee as reluctant to read and enforce the code. When she tried to “look at what the code says” she said, “Nobody wanted her to follow the

law.” While no other county chairs expressed this level of dysfunction in their county boards, Jones was not alone in her concern for better cooperation and a close reading of the laws. This issue came into sharp focus for many county chairs in the wake of the 2014 midterm primary when poll inspectors selected by the Chris McDaniel campaign for Senate began producing “evidence” of wide voting “irregularities” at the county primary level (Politico, Sarah Smith, June 27, 2014). Several county chairs mentioned that the intense scrutiny by these volunteers demonstrated how important training of poll workers and other volunteers is to the integrity of the overall election.

Party chairs’ role as an official of the party takes on various levels of importance. While some indicate that they primarily focus on their statutory responsibility and work hard to preserve independence from individual campaigns, others mention that they take an active role in campaigns, both in the early primary stage and the general election stages. County chairs provide contacts, context, information and institutional support to candidates as they start their campaigns. Other party chairs note the difference between the role of a county chair and the role of a general party operative. Geoffrey Yoste, the Republican chair from Lafayette County said, “After being involved in campaigns so much, I’m used to being in the middle of the fight, whereas in the primary, we run the primary... We functionally take a very administrative role.” In many ways the role of the county chair is to remain a neutral but partisan force in the county. It is a delicate line to walk for county chairs.

Beyond Statutory Responsibility

The Organizer and Referee

As the contact person for the party in a county, county chairs are in a unique position to connect a wide variety of voters throughout their county. They are the essential organizing unit

for the state party and are responsible for spearheading county events and getting volunteers. The county chairs can crystallize movement in their areas and precipitate action on ideas that would otherwise be lost in the churn of an election cycle or a particularly dull off year. Democrat Justin Cluck of Lafayette County mentions that his party organization is responsible for organizing everything from fundraisers to “door knocking” events and voter registration drives. Other county chairs recognize the need to organize volunteers, going so far as to metaphorically “drag them out of the house” when they are uncooperative.

John Taylor of the Madison County GOP mentioned an anecdote of this concept of the county chair as an organizer. Taylor said that before he was county chair that there had been talk of a fundraising event to rival that of a neighboring county with a more established GOP committee. Taylor recalls when he received a note from then State Party Chair Jim Herring encouraging him to pursue the idea. Within the year, Taylor had held the county’s first major fundraising event and now it is a regular event in the county. As Taylor describes, the event will “have four, five, or six-hundred people” with a “big dinner and speaker.” In 2013, the group hosted Tom Cotton, then an Arkansas representative and now one of the shining stars of the Republican Congress. “We’re one of the few counties that actually puts an event on like that. It’s a party building event, a money raising event, and usually by the time that we get through with three years of fundraising, we’ll have about \$50,000 in the bank to help on the presidential and statewide races in our county,” Taylor said.

At the same time as party chairs are organizing their county operations, they also have to serve as referee between similar but sometimes competing interests within their own party. This organizational capacity is especially important as the Democratic party seeks to regrow its shrinking base in the state and the Republican party is fractured by infighting brought on by the

rise of increasingly impatient and ultra conservative factions like the Tea Party. Butler McLeod, the Democratic chair from Yalobusha recognized this role in his interview. He spoke about the apparent tension between the different levels of the party within the county. County officials were in charge of confirming appointments to city election councils. City officials wanted full control. County officials had to balance the entire county's concerns. City officials represented a significant portion of the county's population. There was just a "different personality in the city," according to McLeod. McLeod used his position to keep the city in control and act as referee between their board and the county board.

All across the state, there is a growing conservative movement in the Tea Party. The Tea Party Republicans stake out aggressive stances on issues and fight for them without a willingness to compromise. Main line party members, meanwhile, recognize that politics is a "marathon and not a sprint." These party members are slower to act, socially conservative, but more willing to accept the realities that come with living in the poorest state in the nation. John Taylor, the GOP county chair for Madison has to deal with this divide, mending fences and repairing relationships between the factions. Taylor is careful not to "pick fights with anyone" or "call any names." He recognizes the state divide and has been working to repair relationships at the county level. However, he places a lot of the responsibility on the state party. While he recognizes that the state party was "dealt a bad stack of cards" with the Tea Party split, he said it's "their responsibility to heal this wound."

Growing the Party on the Front Lines

A more traditional role of the county chair is growing the party in the county. County officials step outside their legislatively mandated roles to ensure that their county is developing its base and adding new members. Geoffrey Yoste, GOP Chair for Lafayette County said that he

thought that the “role of the party... is to grow the party and to grow it a the local level.” Yoste is in a county on the border of a Republican congressional district, but his county leans more Democratic than many of the neighboring counties. The county is “purple” by many accounts, due in part to its large population of college students and professors in Oxford, Mississippi, home to the state’s largest university. Yoste hopes to convert more local officeholders to Republican. He recognizes that there are many people who vote Republican in statewide and national races, but he has to convince them to vote that way in the local races.

Chris Taylor, the Democrat chair for Oktibbeha County, takes a similar front line approach to growing the party, calling voters to build call lists and fielding complaints. Some voters are agreeable, but others “cuss him” and others out when they call. Taylor says that his county is full of rivalries. “In some places you have split driveways, one side of them will be Republican and the other Democrat. And they always be fighting. A sign war. But they’re friends,” Taylor said.

Getting Out the Vote

Part of being at the front lines is taking responsibility for local candidates who want to run for office. County officials recognize the importance of having strong candidates who have a well-supported campaign structure in keeping their party in power. Strong local candidates support statewide races, and both Republicans and Democrats are fighting for more control over each office. Butler McLeod of Yalobusha recognizes his role to “basically get as many Democrat elected as possible.” Justin Cluck, his Democratic counterpart in Lafayette County, also takes an active role in “helping candidates with whatever they need.” The executive council helps prepare mailers, goes door to door, puts out signs, etc. Geoffrey Yoste of the Lafayette

GOP takes a less direct role, but still connects candidates to resources and campaign consultants. Candidates who want to run for office usually start by asking him where to begin. After that, it is up to the candidates to get out the vote.

Several county chairs indicated that a key part of their role in getting out the vote was identifying voters. County party organizations maintain in-depth lists of voters and contact information for their records and they share this information with candidates on a regular basis. County chairs take some personal level of responsibility for cleaning up these lists. One county chair noted that some contacts will “hang up or say they don’t give a damn or nearly cuss’em out. They’ll say don’t call this number no more, and we’ll just automatically cross them out.” Other county chairs left this role of identifying voters to candidates. The variance seemed to be commensurate with the demonstrated involvement of the county chairs. County chairs who took a more active role overall in the county affairs took more of an active role in getting out the vote. More Democratic chairs indicated that they prioritized getting out the vote for specific candidates than did Republican chairs.

Voter Education

Part of getting out the vote is informing the public about the process and why they should care. County chairs take that one step further by engaging potential voters with party issues on a regular basis. It is not simply enough to make people aware of the candidates and the issues; the county chairs seek to make the people care enough to act on their knowledge. County chairs employ a variety of methods to engage their publics, some overtly political, others more philosophical and issue-oriented. They educate voters in person- through one on one interaction,

in group settings, or through the media by writing letters to the editor or helping candidates place ads.

One chair who specifically mentioned his role as a voter educator was Democrat Chris Taylor of Oktibbeha County. “My job as the county chair is to make sure that the Democrats in my county are well informed about what is going on with Democrats throughout the state and the nation.. Our purpose is to educate voters on the Democratic ideas...If I can educate you I can keep you voting Democrat. ... If I don’t educate you on your ideology of the Democratic Party which is different from what the Republican say, then I am not doing my job.”

Methods of Reaching Voters

A discussion of voter education transitions well into a discussion of the methods that county chairs use to engage voters with their organizations. Every single county chair mentioned word of mouth communication to some degree, with the majority mentioning that word of mouth was “critical” or the “most effective” way for reaching voters. However, despite a consensus on word of mouth as being the best method to reach voters, county chairs took different approaches to reaching voters in either formal or informal ways.

Formal methods for word of mouth communication included monthly meetings where county chairs invited party members to bring a friend or typical fundraiser events, where attendees spoke with the county chair or a speaker for the party.

Justin Cluck (D-Lafayette) mentions his “friend raiser” meetings as getting “people there” to “discuss the issues “and “feel more involved.” Soon after a “friend raiser” meeting, he can get volunteers to “get out into the community and talk, knock on doors, and call people.” The higher engagement he says leads to higher turnout at the election. Chris Taylor of Oktibbeha added that at his monthly meetings, he encourages people to invite “5 to 10 and then they’ll tell 5

to 10.” He calls it a “pyramid scheme” where multiple levels of people work to get many more to attend than the original invitees.

County chairs are not immune from attendance problems. Some county chairs in rural areas noted a reluctance of individuals to attend county meetings. Larry Coleman, Democratic Chair of Jones County, said that getting people to meetings was difficult at best. Young people are particularly hard to target, Coleman said. “That’s a battle I fight. It’s almost like you have to go their house and drag them out to make them show up screaming and hollering,” Coleman said.

For county chairs that succeed, meetings do have an impact on members. James Person of Yalobusha says that his organization has the “highest ratio of success with people who take part in the meetings,” higher even than social media or a traditional newspaper column.

Informal efforts to communicate with voters can have similar or better levels of success, county chairs said. One on one meetings in “coffee shops and delicatessens,” as James Person said, are something that he hopes he can do more of in the future. “I think I could do better,” Person said. Lew Yoder of Jones County likes the one on one meetings and knows that people seek him out as a source of information in the county. “A lot of people know me and know that I am active in politics,” Yoder said.

Community Groups

While informal meetings are highly effective on an individual basis, county chairs indicated that informal group settings are integral to their operations. Mississippi Republican chairs rely upon the Republican Women organizations in their counties. The Republican Women organizations, not limited to just women members anymore, provide a range of support to county chairs. One county chair touted full, integrated support, while another just recognized the

organizing capacity of the group. The primary assets of the group are their readiness to volunteer and ability to attract new members to the party. “I just have a farm team of people that want to get involved. The Republican Women really... were instrumental and the heart of the party in Madison County,” John Taylor, Madison County chair, said.

Kay Patterson of Marion County traced her involvement in county politics back to the Republican Women organization. The Republican Women organization in her county provides the support that a county organization usually would. There is a tight integration between the party and the organization. “We don’t have enough people in the party per se to do it, so the Republican women, which is men and women, ...they’re the ones that end up supporting our candidates. We get our speakers together and run it as the Republican Women and the party.”

Lew Yoder mentions that his county’s organization has about 100 members who host events and meet with people on their own, at places like the county fair or at fundraisers hosted by the Republican Women. Their goal is to “get out as a party in supporting candidates and letting people know that the Jones County Republican Party is here and that (community members) can be a part of (the party.)”

For the Democrats, their churches were key to their organizational capacity. Republican also recognized the strengths of churches, but for black Democrat chairs, churches permeated many of their comments about reaching out to the community. The strengths of the churches are that they put a large number of the community into one place. The churches provide easy access to these populations and their effect is multiplied when members take their information home and share with friends and family. Community leaders are drawn to churches and churches produce community leaders, some county chairs said. Further, the Democrats touted (and opposing Republicans resented) the ability of church leaders to “push their flocks” towards

politics. While campaign and non-profit laws typically ban churches from being overtly political, it seems that these rules go unenforced in the rural counties of Mississippi.

Butler McLeod mentioned how some of the church's programs offer ways to introduce the "services of the county" to elderly members of the community. He said they were instrumental in providing access for word of mouth conversations in a place that had a feeling of "community." Marcelean Arrington of Jasper County said, "Churches are the main resource that we have. That's the way to get information out." Arrington pointed out that even members who do not work would go to church and hear about voting in the next election. "If they see that, they'll get out," Arrington said.

For some county leaders, the strength of churches was in the leadership of the churches. Community and church leaders are typically inseparable in the conservative, rural counties. As Butler McLeod said, "Most of our members belong to a church and are active in a church. So, really, you can't separate the two because 98 percent of them are in a church. How can you?" This leadership concentration at the church leads the community towards a common goal. As McLeod continued, he felt that there was a "moral responsibility" of people to get involved. "You've got to get out to vote or else you can't have any complaints," he said.

John Taylor, the Republican chair of Madison County saw this power first hand in the chaos of the 2014 midterm Republican primary runoff. There, he saw many Democrats who had voted in the Democratic primary want to cross over to vote in the election. In Mississippi, voters who vote on one party's ticket for a primary election cannot vote in the other party's runoff. As he recalled, "All of sudden we start getting tons of (Democratic voters) wanting to vote in the Republican primary, but they had already voted...They were hostile about it. ...They had fliers

in their hand telling me, “I was told that I could do this.” I asked where they had gotten these fliers and they told me that they had gotten them in the churches,” Taylor said.

County party chairs also indicated that they try to get involved in their community in non-political ways. One county chair, Republican Kay Patterson, meets many of her party members through her work as a realtor. Another, John Taylor of Madison, volunteers with a local youth leadership group that is non-partisan. James Person, Republican county chair of Yalobusha County, says that he sometimes attends events where people join to share their governing philosophies in a public forum. These events are not overtly partisan, but political messages can be woven into participants’ presentations. The free flowing nature of the discussions allows for nuance and discussion of the issues that affect party and non-party members alike.

Off the Grid: Social Networking in Real Life

A major part of the county chair’s role was selecting quality precinct captains and county executive boards to bring people to the party. Each person of the board and captain of the precincts brought his or her own knowledge of the people in the area. With deep connections to the people in varying segments of the county population, the board and precinct members expanded the communication capacity of the county chairs exponentially and aided in building an off the grid social network of people who could be recruited to vote and to volunteer. Information flows move smoothly in a well-oiled county organization, because the executive board communicates to the precinct captains who then take the message back to their local community organizations, including churches and other civic groups. As Lew Yoder said, “That’s how a lot of information gets out.”

These precinct captains help the committee when they want to go door-to-door and getting locals to vote. On an individual basis, door-to-door campaigning is still popular with

county chairs in the state. If the committee needs to do a phone bank or go door to door, the precinct captains rustle up the labor. As Marcelean Arrington, Democrat of Jasper County put it, “We have a person in our committee that is in that precinct and it is their job to find other people... who volunteer to help.”

Just like there are problems with recruiting quality “friends” on virtual social networks who provide feedback and participate constructively in conversations, county chairs expressed problems with recruiting quality members for their party organizations. Besides the obvious problems of Democrats trying to operate in overwhelmingly Republican counties or vice versa, the chairs expressed frustration with a general sense of apathy in their voters, especially young voters. As Larry Coleman said, “I’d like to think that it was bad weather that kept them away, but that’s not the case... You ask them... and they won’t show up.” Justin Cluck, Democrat of Lafayette County agreed, “The main thing we need to get more turnout is we need more manpower.”

County chairs work to overcome these problems that are built into their social networks, but several expressed resentment over the “direction of politics” in the country. Negative perceptions of politics drives away potential voters and makes people less inclined to get involved in a county party organization that they may tie to the national level organization. The Lafayette County party chairs delved into this issue particularly.

Justin Cluck, the Democratic Chair, said that they fight the issue in his county with information. “We get out there and meet people, and let them know that the things that they see on TV, the negative things that they’re trying to make about politics, isn’t what politics is about.”

Yoste said, “When they hear all the bad things going on in Washington, gridlock, or a member of Congress doing something illegal, or illicit, that gets their attention and they get

disenchanted with that...They feel disenfranchised... Politics has just turned kind of ugly, and people want to stay away from it and don't want to put their name on it.”

The Role of Competition in Voter Connection

The series of questions I asked county chairs about the role of competition in their counties garnered a mixed series of responses. I sorted the responses into three categories: Low competition levels, competition is positive and competition is negative. No county chair indicated a high level of competition in their county between Republicans and Democrats at the U.S. House level. County chairs in Republican districts reported more competition between Tea Party and mainline Republicans. Democratic county chairs reported competition at the primary level and in local races where party was deemed less important and community involvement was more important. Overall, competition was not deemed very important, though some county chairs recognized that more competition could be positive in getting people to the polls and causing more people to care. One county chair refused this notion, saying that more competition would actually do more harm than good.

A sample of the county chairs responses would indicate that competition levels are low in the state. One county chair, James Person, attributed this to the character of the state and its history. “The problem we have as Mississippians... is that we used not to vote against (the incumbent.)... As far as we were concerned, it was his for as long as he wanted it.”

Another county chair, Justin Cluck, attributes the lack of competition to voter apathy and dissatisfaction. The same issues that turn away volunteers from county party organizations turn voters away from the polls en masse. However, he recognizes that it is up to the county chairs to get people to care. “If turnout doesn't go that way that you want it to, all responsibility falls on you,” Cluck said.

Kay Patterson dismissed the role of competition in her county. She is enjoying the spoils of a Republican takeover in her county. Republicans hold many of the county's local and countywide offices. While some of the races are competitive between Republicans, Patterson said that "elections go my way now."

For those county chairs that did recognize the presence of competition in their county, they mostly indicated the positive effects of competition and the benefits of a more competitive system to government in general. The nature of competition in Mississippi has to remain positive, some said, or voters will get turned off. Voters expect a certain level of competition, but that competition must be positive to be effective. Anything less and the candidates risk alienating their base.

As Geoffrey Yoste of Lafayette said, "All politics in Mississippi is local, even if you are running for Senate, you've got to run it like you're running for mayor." This competition brings out the "finest" in candidates as they vie for personal connections to every voter. In this quest for a personal connection, the candidates with the best character and personalities win out.

For the county chair who thought competition was negative, he attributed his answer to the disparity between the Republican and Democratic Party bases in his county. Chris Taylor is from Oktibbeha County, where the county has a wide income disparity. Taylor said that competition would be negative for his organization because "the Republicans have more money and can do more things." He thought that for competition to be positive for his party that he would need to be able to compete.

Other Competitive Trends

Within the categories of responses that I outlined earlier in this section, there were several trends that county chairs identified in Mississippi. I included trends that were mentioned by more than one county chair.

The first trend that the chairs indicated was the existence of strong Democratic districts in the middle of Republican districts. The pockets of Democratic control result in many local offices being held by Democrats, but the state level offices that control larger swaths of the state swing Republican. As one Democratic county chair said, “local people vote Democrat.” GOP party chair Yoste agreed with that conclusion. “It’s a battle... to get people to vote Republican on the local level.” Democrats in these counties capitalize on this strength.

However, these “Democrat” Republicans are “blue dog” Democrats, by and large. Many Democrats and Republicans in Mississippi, if they take a step back from partisanship, can agree on several major policy issues that would divide Republicans and Democrats in other states. However, as Kim Jones indicated in her county, “if you don’t run Democrat, then you can’t win... The races aren’t even close.”

Republicans in these districts range from being scared out of running to “barely getting out alive.” Democrats who might want to switch parties do not want to lose public trust if they were to switch. However, Republicans are encouraged by the recent turnover of some counties to their “correct” political position.

Republican chairs in these swing counties work hard to convince potential switchers and blue dog Democrat that the tide of the county is turning and that if they switch now, that voters will not abandon them. This is not without challenges, but it’s largely a fight against history. As James Person said about his county, “Most elected officials run as Democrat even though their

political leanings are Republican.” He put the figure at 4 out of 5 Democrats in his county vote with Republicans.

Democrats fear this switch. Some Democratic chairs see the switching as a betrayal of the party. Larry Coleman, who has seen several Democrats he put in office switch to the Republican Party, said that the switches represent a “gaming of the system” and an “undermining” of the people who put the candidate in office. “I would love to think that it was fair play, but fairness had nothing to do with it,” Coleman said.

Republicans echo the fear of losing ground to the other party too. Republicans in what were once safe Republican districts are seeing population shifts that may impact their districts. As the state grows in population in a few concentrated areas around the state capital, to the north around Memphis and a few other areas across the state, these districts have the greatest potential for change. John Taylor, GOP chair for Madison County pointed to this growth as a potential way for his county to tilt from Republican to Democratic control, especially as Democratic voters from Hinds County move north from the capital to take advantage of the growing amenities and strong communities in Madison County. The county has some of the state’s best public schools and one of the fastest growing retail areas in the region. “That gap that we had for victory is getting smaller and smaller everyday. The day is going to come with.... people moving in that people will have to be on their a game for the election... They’re going to have to get out there just as hard as they did in the primary,” Taylor said.

Republicans also have to contend with competition from within their party. The recent spate of interparty disputes affects the ability of the party to present a unified front. Without a unified front, messaging to voters is damaged and Democrats can siphon away votes. As one Democratic county chair said, “The other Republicans don’t want to associate with (the Tea

Party.)” The split breaks up strong organizations like the Republican Women that Republicans use to reach voters. Party chairs recognize that the two sides need to be reconciled, but that job they say is up to the state party officials and individual county chairs to help smooth over relationships that have been damaged in recent election cycles. John Taylor of Madison specifically calls out the Republican state party chair Joe Nosef as having to lead the reconciliation efforts. “I told him in conversations...as far as I am concerned, it’s your responsibility to heal this wound,” Taylor said.

Responses from both counties emphasized the importance of quality candidates to competition in the state. Even in races that are not typically competitive, quality candidates can drive people to the polls and tilt elections. Responses emphasized the importance of quality candidates to overcome the negative associations people had with politics and government in general. The ability of candidates to connect with voters and show them that they “care” was deemed important. Being “principled,” “knowledgeable” and “honest” was also important to respondents. As Republican county chair Lew Yoder said, “(Elections are) about finding good qualified candidates to run for office and then having them articulate that message to voters...I think quality candidates are what bring people to the polls.” Justin Cluck, Democratic chair for Lafayette County said, “First and foremost, you have to have a good candidate... If you care about something people are going to see it in your face.”

At the same time as county chairs were speaking about the importance of quality candidates, they were emphasizing the importance of “clean” competition to avoid turning off voters. The 2014 midterm showdown between Tea Party candidate Chris McDaniel and incumbent Thad Cochran has particularly affected Republican chairs ability to communicate

with voters who were disgusted by the election. Channels are still open, but they are working to overcome the differences in the future.

Even a Democratic chair agreed that the McDaniel/Cochran competition had no place in the state. “What you did with your life, that’s between you and God. Don’t come telling me what this person did... I want clean competition,” Butler McLeod said. Lew Yoder agreed, saying, “We all expect the presidential race to get nasty at some point, but all Americans are disassociated from a presidential race, but you’re not disassociated from a supervisor race.”

Redistricting Effects

While I intended to spend much of my time speaking about the effects of redistricting on communication channels between county party chairs and voters, county party chairs were hesitant to attribute much value to the differences between how they communicated before the last redistricting cycle and now. For most of the county chairs I spoke to, redistricting had little effect. While a few of that number did recognize some effect, the changes were minimal, and related to administrative changes or efficiencies that arose from consolidating all their precincts into one U.S. House district. Only three county chairs mentioned major effects from the redistricting change, and all three of these chairs saw their entire county switch from a Republican controlled house district to a Democrat controlled house district. Both Yalobusha and Panola County were annexed into Democratic District 2. For the Democrat I spoke to in Yalobusha, Butler McLeod, he felt more empowered and connected. For the two Republican I spoke to in Yalobusha and Panola, they felt disconnected and at worst “abandoned.”

Butler McLeod benefited directly from the switch of his county to Mississippi’s U.S. House District 2. Yalobusha County is largely rural, with a low population density that fits well with the Delta’s rural profile. Whereas before, he felt disconnected from his Republican

representative to Congress (then MS-1 Representative, Alan Nunnelee.), now he has a personal connection to Thompson. Thompson reaches out to him and people in his county on a regular basis and encourages them to come to him with problems in the county. “He’s really receptive to that kind of thing,” McLeod said. The increased connection made him feel more empowered as a Democratic operative in the county.

On the other side of the spectrum are the Republican representatives of Panola and Yalobusha County who now feel less connected to their representative in Congress. James Person, of Yalobusha County, said, “I’ve never met my congressman. I’ve never seen him.” Person said that the lack of connection goes even deeper than not ever having personally met the man. He says that he works with people who just assume that they have no influence with their congressman. “I am not even on his mailing list. I am on the first district congressman’s mailing list... I keep more up to date with what our first district congressman is doing... I don’t know if he really concerns himself with my issues,” Person said.

Kimberly Jones, the outgoing Republican chair for Panola County, said that she even felt “betrayed by the Mississippi Republican Party,” after the switch. She felt that the party made a conscious decision to abandon her county after the switch. While her perceptions are a bit more extreme than any other county chair I spoke to, her vocal opposition to the redistricting brings to light a problem with redistricting. People who were previously empowered can be stripped of that power with the drawing of a line on a map. Further, state party organizations have little incentive to invest in counties that are not in their safer districts, especially rural ones that have lower population densities that cannot be easily reached through traditional methods.

CHAPTER VII: DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

I started this research project with the goal of revealing how the redistricting process in Mississippi affected county party chairs' actions. As my research progressed, I found that county party chairs, by and large, did not claim any major effect of redistricting on their outreach efforts. The only county chairs who saw changes were county party chairs who found their entire county changing from a majority Republican U.S. House district to the state's only majority-minority U.S. House district. These changes to the district lines were largely out of the control of the county party chairs who were affected, and arguably could not have been avoided due to state-imposed redistricting requirements that dictate continuity, compactness and the preservation of communities of interest. County chairs were much more willing to discuss their own outreach to voters, so much of my report focuses on their discussions of these efforts. After the last redistricting cycle, county chairs continued to do what they always do: administer elections and get out the vote.

My research is admittedly limited and does not cover the full scope of county party chair experiences, even in the counties that I targeted. Furthermore, I recognize that interviews with county party chairs do not provide a full picture of Mississippi's county party organizations. If I were to begin my research anew with more time and more resources, I would interview both county party organizations in each county I target. I would also expand my study to include all counties that saw redistricting boundary changes and a selection of counties that did not see any differences. The counties without changes would provide context for the responses of the county chairs that experienced a district boundary change. I would conduct multiple interviews with each participant to establish a working relationship and to allow myself time to digest what they said and to clarify previous responses. I would also target counties with large county

organizations for further review, engaging members of the county's executive board and precinct captains for a more complete view of the county party organization structure. While I do not pretend that my research is quantitative or fully descriptive of the entire state, increasing the scope, scale and depth of my study could yield much better results and clearer answers. Further refining of my research could actually elicit the depth of response on the effects of redistricting that I had hoped to gather with my initial research plan.

With those caveats in mind, I still found that my research brought up several interesting points that deserve further study as county party organizations move into the 2015 and 2016 election cycles. One of the most striking observations I made early in the interview process was the synonymous nature of "black" and "Democrat" in the vernacular of Mississippi county party chairs. I observed this distinctive interchangeable use of the word in black and white, young and old, Republican and Democrat county party chairs. As a native Mississippian, I was not surprised to see issues of race crop up in my interviews, but the casual interchangeability of the two terms surprised me. While it is true that the vast majority of African American voters in the state lean Democratic, there are still African American Republicans and to a greater extent, white Democrats, especially in counties that have not seen a countywide Republican takeover of local offices. This seeming marginalization of these two populations deserves greater attention, as Winkle and Forgette urge. Southern redistricting processes that work to create "descriptive representation" may come at the expense of these significant fringes of more moderate voters (Winkle and Forgette 305).

My brief study of descriptive representation initiatives and the impacts of the Voting Rights Act on southern voting competition along with my interactions with county party chairs has caused me to question the underlying ideology of descriptive representation as it is currently

implemented. As a white male living in a state with a history of oppression of minorities, I recognize the need for government to ensure that all parts of the population have access to the polls and I would not want to deny any group that right. However, I have to ask if we are fully aware of the consequences that structuring states to eliminate competition between parties can have on government and the voting population at large. The current structure does not effectively allow the full range of political expression in both majority and minority districts. While I would be wary of any changes that remove structural support for minority expression, I would urge state party organizations and lawmakers to consider the impacts of the current districts in the state. I hope through further study that we could design a system of districts that reintroduces two party competition to the entire state and still ultimately guarantees minority representation on both the state and federal level.

Mississippi, now that it is free from Justice Department control, will have to develop its own system for redistricting. Whereas the state has relied upon federal intervention to design its districts for the past fifty years, it will now be free to succeed or fail on its own. It must continue to provide for minority representation and will have to consider seriously questions about what it wants the future of its political districts to be. Researchers, journalists, policymakers and more importantly, citizens, will have to follow the actions of the state closely to ensure that it does not abuse its newfound freedom.

As significant stakeholders in this newfound freedom, state party organizations should work towards more involvement and engagement with their voters. New technology has enabled a finer grain method for reaching voters, but the ground game is as important as ever. The party organizations that can translate obvious success in one county to success statewide will have the greatest advantage. State party organizations should study effective county party organizations

and develop ways to get other county party chairs performing at the same level. They should consider further training or support programs for county chairs and their organizations. County party chairs should never “feel abandoned” by their party. The state party is a hub for information and should never lose sight of that role. The state party can and should be able to equip their county chairs with the tools and resources for success. I would argue that the state party’s success depends on it. As the state’s demographics shift over the next decade, party organizations cannot afford to ignore their county chairs. They are the front lines for their voters. When they speak out, voters listen.

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